

Prologue

Even Kreacher's steak-and-kidney pie tasted like ashes in Harry Potter's mouth as he attempted to choke his dinner down. The tea he sipped to clear his tight throat was bitter, corrupt. The house-elf did his best, he always did, especially on particularly significant days, but Harry was physically unable to enjoy the elf's offerings. No solace found in food. Not even Ginny Potter, his best source of comfort, could ease the sorrow that weighed heavily on his soul, dragging him into a depression that did not allow him to eat, to drink, to make love. Not today.

The three people in the dining room could not pretend, as they normally attempted to, that their broken hearts would heal someday. Ginny played with her food, pushing it around and around her plate without taking a bite. She stared aimlessly at it, her head bowed as though in prayer. Ron Weasley did not even attempt to create an illusion that he was eating. He slouched in his chair, his arms folded across his chest. Harry could see the muscles in his jaw working as he ground his teeth, and his nostrils flared every once in a while as though he was on the verge of tears.

"Shall I get the firewhisky?" Harry asked quietly. "I bought the best. For tonight."

"Might as well," Ron said tonelessly. Ginny only nodded, her eyes closed.

Harry stood. He could have used magic to Summon the bottle, but felt a restlessness. He crossed the room that, despite Kreacher's best efforts, was as dismal and gloomy as Grimmauld Place had been. His mind skittered away from that thought, though; despite the gloom of the Black residence, he'd had good times there as well. Remembering the good times made his stomach churn like acid even more than remembering the bad.

There were no photographs anywhere in the house, except in the album Hagrid had given Harry so many years before. There were no cheerful waves coming from dead people to deepen the sorrow.

Harry had packed up the pictures himself – it had seemed too much for Ginny and Ron, to see their family smiling up at them.

“—Harry?” Ginny’s voice cut through his thoughts. He turned toward her.

“Yeah?”

“You were just standing there...” He saw understanding in her brown eyes. He didn’t know where or who he’d be without her. He’d most likely be dead. They’d been married for almost three years; they’d married only months after the Battle for Hogwarts, clinging to each other with only Ron at their side. Flitwick, the Headmaster of Hogwarts and one of the few survivors from the Battle, had officiated through tears.

“I know, I’m sorry.”

He ended up Summoning the bottle anyway, and three shots later he almost felt numb.

“They’d hate what we’re doing,” Ron said unexpectedly. Harry had lost track of how much of the bottle he’d gone through, but he wasn’t his best mate’s minder. Ron only talked about them when he was drunk.

“I know,” Ginny said. “But we do what we can.”

“Hermione,” his voice cracked, and he rubbed his chin. “She’d kick our arses.”

“She would,” Harry agreed. He’d give quite a lot to have his dead friend kick his arse.

“Fred and George would be – they would be t-terrible,” Ginny tried to smile, but it came out a bit lopsided, and disappeared almost as soon as it arrived.

“Your mum and dad would have to give us stern talking-tos,” Harry reached over and grabbed his shoulder with the hand that was not holding his firewhisky. “Your mum especially.”

“Dad would be – he’d be in the kitchen, looking at the Muggle stuff while Mum yelled at us.”

“Percy would be reading us the riot act, telling us we’re not being good role-models, and that we were disgracing the name of Weasley.”

“Meanwhile, he’d be scheduling interviews – *after* he got rid of all the bottles of firewhisky in the house,” Ron finished when Ginny’s voice faded. Her face was set, her jaw clenched tight, and she gripped Harry’s hand fiercely.

“Fleur’d be so angry with us that she’d be screaming at us in French,” Harry put in. The firewhisky burned his throat and made it easier to talk. “And Bill would curse us so badly that we’d be old and gray by the time it lifted.”

“Charlie would set dragons on us,” Ginny offered. “You know he would.”

But they were all gone, *all* of them. *A demolished hall stacked with bodies and washed with blood.* Harry shook his head impatiently. They were sleeping in the ground, unaware of the lonely and bitter victory and the pain their deaths had caused. If Harry had known he was a Horcrux sooner, if he had given himself up before the slaughter...

“Stop it, Harry,” Ginny and Ron said in unison. “We know what you’re thinking,” Ginny added. “*It wasn’t your fault.*”

“I-I-I just –”

“I know,” Ginny said, voice gentle. “But lay the blame where blame is due. *Voldemort* killed them. *Bellatrix* killed them. *Dolohov* killed them. And you killed those who stole our family away.”

“Only once,” Harry said bitterly.

Ron blew out a deep breath, took another shot, and squeezed his eyes closed. “I’m going to miss them. Always and always.”

"Always and always," Harry and Ginny echoed. *Always and always* was a phrase that had initially begun with Harry's proposal to Ginny. It had not been romantic. One solid month of funerals, and the love he'd felt for her was the only thing keeping him sane.

"Ginny," he whispered as they lay with arms wrapped around each other. They'd just woken up. Mornings had been difficult then – in that first moment of wakefulness it was easy to forget that victory looked an awful lot like defeat.

"Harry," she murmured against his chest.

"I can't live without you," he said simply. "I wouldn't survive."

"Me either," she sighed.

"I'm going to love you," he said. "Always and always. Will you marry me?" It had been the best he could do. They'd reunited after a year of fruitless searches for the Horcruxes, and an open attack on the Burrow. Harry had realized, standing in the rubble, horrified, that despite his best efforts, Ginny and her family would always be targets. He hadn't wanted to lose her without her knowing, everyday, that despite time and distance, she was the best part of him. They'd been hopeful. After another year of Ginny in hiding with her family, and frequent visits, Harry had decided that as soon as he'd taken care of Voldemort, he would put a ring on her finger and never let her go. He'd had daydreams of how he'd ask her. Possibly in the Gryffindor common room, or on a Quidditch pitch. He'd do something romantic – he'd ask Hermione to help him.

But it was not to be.

It had become a catch phrase, and they'd both said it in the vows they had made to each other on a lonely hill covered in heather. It had struck a chord in Ron, though they hadn't been aware of it for months.

It was Christmas day, and grief had raged inside while a storm raged outside. A day that should have been happy. But when each person had lost everyone else they had ever loved, that was impossible. They'd found solace in wine.

"I'm going to miss them," Ron said. "Always and always." He was not so drunk that he was completely unaware that he had usurped words that were special to Harry and Ginny, and his face fell into apologetic lines. "I'm sorry, I –"

"No," Harry said firmly. He shared a glance with Ginny. "It fits."

And it did. Always and always meant him and Ginny. But it also meant him and Ron, and the past they shared. It meant Ron and Ginny, the only survivors of a large family, more fragile than any of them had ever dreamed. It meant the wounds that would always, always be there, and it meant the love they would always, always feel for those they'd lost.

They sat in silence for a good hour, and Harry was sure that he was not alone in his thoughts. Ginny had scooted her chair closer to Harry; their shoulders brushed. He wanted to hold her, bury himself inside her until he lost himself, but it was the anniversary of everything they had lost, and Harry didn't think he could make love to her if he tried.

"I wish we had Hermione's Time-Turner," Ron said absently, his voice hoarse. "I wish we could go back, I wouldn't have been incapacitated by that effing curse. I could've protected them, maybe..."

"This is a Time-Turner, Harry," Hermione's voice echoed from the past, and Harry was struck by a thought so wild and insane that he knew he was even drunker than he'd thought. He tried to stop it, tried to pretend it hadn't occurred to him, but the ludicrous idea gripped him tightly. He opened his mouth, but no words emerged.

"Harry?" He could hear the alarm in Ginny's voice. He must look wild; he *felt* wild. He had the urge to laugh.

"What if we could?" He asked. "What if we *could*?"

"Could what?" Ron gaped at him. Not surprising, that, Harry could not remember feeling so driven. Not since they'd lost everything but each other on the field of battle.

"What if we could go back in time?"

“Harry...” Ginny sighed. “It isn’t possible. It isn’t. Time-Turners can only go back a few hours, you *know* that. You’re drunk, we should go to bed.”

“No,” Harry said forcefully. “We should think about this, we have to!”

“You’re mental, mate,” Ron said flatly. “Mental. You shouldn’t even be thinking about this, it isn’t healthy.”

Harry’s laughter sounded eerie even to his own ears. “The way we live isn’t healthy, Ron. It’s been three years, and we haven’t done a damn thing since it happened. We’re *old* and we’re only twenty-four. We’re barely breathing, the three of us. If you two weren’t here, I probably would’ve committed suicide ages ago.”

Tears stood out in Ginny’s eyes. “But Harry... it’s *impossible*, what you’re thinking.”

“How do you know?” Harry asked belligerently. “Maybe people have done it, they just never talked about it.”

“What, we’re going to build a super-powerful Time-Turner?” Ron asked. “Go back in time and save everyone while remaining hidden? What could we possibly change?”

“Everything,” Harry said. “Everything. We’ve got to *try*, damn it!”

“Harry, we have all these memories of living without them,” Ginny said. “Three years worth of memories. If we really did go back in time, we’d already know it. They’d be alive.”

“Not unless we changed Fate,” Harry said. “We’d have different memories. We’d be at the Burrow right now, celebrating our victory, not wallowing in the price we paid to have it.”

Ron and Ginny exchanged looks.

“Listen,” Harry said, growing frustrated. “Ron, wouldn’t you want your *wife* back? Ginny, wouldn’t you want to live in a world where your family still breathed?”

"That's cruel," Ginny said softly, but Harry could tell that she was thinking about it.

"I'm sorry," he said, though he wasn't. He felt almost alive again; he felt the way he did when he made love to Ginny or flew around the countryside with Ron. He felt like he had a purpose. It may not be possible, but he could at least *try*.

"I think Hermione might've mentioned something once," Ron said tentatively, his eyes growing distant. "It was the morning after you guys rescued Sirius. She talked about how Time-Turners were the most reliable way to travel through time."

"And if a Time-Turner is the most reliable, then there've got to be unreliable ones," Harry said. "We can look into that tomorrow, after we talk to Dumbledore's portrait."

"We're going to Hogwarts?" Ginny asked. Harry knew what she was thinking. They hadn't gone back since the morning after the battle; the rubble had not been cleared away, and the bodies had still been in the Great Hall.

"Yes," Harry said.

"Dumbledore would know if there was anything we could do," Ron said.

Harry felt strange, to say the least. For three years, misery had been eating away at him, at all of them. It was odd to have a purpose again. "I think... I really do think there's a way."

His madness had affected Ron and Ginny, he noticed. It took a moment for him to recognize the look on their faces. They looked hopeful for the first time in years.

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Dawn came early the next day, and Harry's sleep had been deep; he had not had a single nightmare. When he awoke, he tossed back one of the bottles of Auntie Jigg's Hangover Remedy that Kreacher had placed on the bedside table sometime during the night, and leapt

from the bad. By the time he washed, Ginny was awake and looking the same way he felt: stunned and purposeful. Why had they not thought of this before? They could've already changed everything!

Ron met them in the sitting room not ten minutes later, his hair still dripping from his own shower. He was not moving like an Inferius anymore, and he almost looked like the old Ron, the Ron that Harry'd gone to Hogwarts with, before the death of his wife, parents, and brothers had turned him into a hollow shell.

Harry grinned. Ron looked gobsmacked.

"We're really doing this, then?" Ron asked. "We're going to try?"

"We are," Ginny said firmly. "We are."

They left the house together, and Harry was once again surprised by how *good* it felt to leave it for a reason other than the few necessities that Kreacher could not acquire for them. They'd become recluses, Harry thought wryly.

They moved forward with purpose, past the wards, and Disapparated together with a loud crack.

Hogsmeade was how he remembered it from his fourth year, without Dementors and fear. People walked openly along the twisted and narrow streets, and Harry only felt a small twinge of resentment at these people who lived and laughed in a world without Voldemort. They had not paid the price the way Harry, Ron, and Ginny had. But they would change that, Harry thought fiercely. Ginny gripped his hand so hard that Harry felt his knuckles pop. When he looked at her, he saw her blazing look, for once not dimmed by sorrow. *They would do this.*

The path to Hogwarts was as long as ever, but it seemed to take only minutes. No one had recognized them, thank Merlin; he supposed that people had stopped hoping to see them, they'd been hidden away for so long.

The gates loomed ahead of them, strong and stoic. Harry remembered when they were twisted and broken after the assault of Voldemort's giants.

"Harry?!"

The three whirled around and saw Hagrid, his mouth open wide with disbelief. He was just as tall as ever, and even wider than when Harry'd last seen him more than two years previously.

"Ron? Ginny?" Hagrid was too stunned to move.

"Hi, Hagrid," Harry said. Ron and Ginny echoed him.

"Wha... What're yeh three doin' here?"

"We've come to see the Headmaster," Harry explained. "Can you get us in the gates?"

Hagrid pulled them open with one hand, and then rushed them, pulling all three into a bone-crushing hug. Harry patted him on the back. When he finally pulled away, he saw tears streaming into his wild beard.

"I didn' think I'd ever see yer again!"

Harry couldn't think of anything to say. Ron and Ginny were silent beside him. Hagrid did not seem to take offense at this, and chattered all the way up to the school. Grawp apparently had found a lady friend, and the centaurs had welcomed three new foals into the herd. Seamus Finnegan had apparently taken a post at the school, and was now the Professor for Defence Against the Dark Arts, despite his missing arm.

They rounded the greenhouses, and found themselves staring up at a sight they had never expected to see again. The grief welled up inside Harry as he stared at the repaired castle. The Astronomy Tower had been rebuilt, and Hogwarts looked as stately as ever. There were no blood-stains on the steps. It was as if it had never happened. But it had. Bill and Fleur had fallen just over there; Harry

could still hear her screams as she stood over Bill's body, taking down three Death Eaters before Dolohov had killed her.

His mouth twisted grimly, and Ginny squeezed his hand.

The Entrance Hall was even worse. In his mind, Harry could still see Hermione burning and hear her anguished cries, could see George falling and breaking his entire body, could see Arthur Weasley hit in the back with *Avada Kedavra* while he'd been trying to avenge Bill's death. Charlie had been mangled by Fenrir Greyback just over there, near the stairs. And that was where an acromantula had torn Percy apart.

Ginny's eyes were wide with horror. She hadn't seen most of her family die; she'd been battling Death Eaters with Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil; but she'd seen the bodies where they lay. Harry had thought she was dead, had thought the Cutting Curse had killed Ron. And fifty feet and three years away from where he stood right now, he'd stood in front of Voldemort and had not defended himself, had watched death speed toward him in the form of a green light because he'd wanted to die. It had killed the Horcrux instead, and Harry had returned to finish off Voldemort, not knowing that Ron and Ginny had survived too.

He took a deep breath. Ron had his eyes squeezed tightly shut, his mouth moving, saying something Harry could not hear. Ginny shook like a leaf beside him.

"Yeh lot..." Hagrid sighed. "I know why yeh didn' wan' to come back."

Harry nodded stiffly. "We still need to see Flitwick."

They left Hagrid and their memories behind and moved up the stairs with purpose. It was early yet, no students were out and about; they were still sleeping in their dormitories.

The gargoyle that guarded the home of the Headmaster was the same. Harry realized that he had no idea what the password was, and could not even begin to guess it.

Ron kicked it with his foot. "Open up!"

“No,” the gargoyle said firmly. “You don’t know the password.”

Harry was just about to send a message via Patronus when he heard footsteps quickly coming toward them.

“Merlin’s balls!” Seamus Finnegan skidded to a halt ten feet away from them. He threw out his arm and braced himself against the wall. “I didn’t think you three were even still alive!”

“Hi, Seamus,” Ginny said quietly. Ron and Harry nodded at him in greeting. “Do you know Flitwick’s password? We’ve got to speak with him.”

“Uh,” Seamus visibly tried to collect himself. It was odd seeing him with only one arm; at least it hadn’t been his wand arm that had gotten severed off. “It’s caliadoc.”

The gargoyle sprung aside and the moving stairs appeared behind it. “What’s caliadoc?” Harry whispered. Ginny shrugged.

“We’ll see you, Seamus,” Ron said. “We’ll catch up – later.”

“Er, yeah.” They left him still standing there with his mouth gaping open. “Yeah, see you around.”

Harry knocked firmly three times. It took several moments for Flitwick to open the door, and they were greeted with the same expression of shock they’d seen on Hagrid’s and Seamus’s faces.

“Well,” Flitwick drew himself up to his full height, about three feet. “*Well.*”

“Headmaster,” Harry said respectfully. “We were wondering if we could converse with Dumbledore’s portrait.”

“I... yes, of course,” Flitwick led them in. It was similar to, yet very different from how it had been during Dumbledore’s time. The small, delicate instruments (the ones that had survived Harry’s wrath, anyway) were gone, and had been replaced by stacks of books. The portraits were the same. The occupant of the biggest one that hung right behind the large desk stared at Harry with widened eyes.

“Harry,” the portrait of Albus Dumbledore said. “And Mrs. Potter, and Mr. Weasley.”

“Dumbledore,” the three murmured.

“Should I...?” Flitwick made vague motions toward the door. Harry felt a pang of guilt at forcing the diminutive man to leave his own office.

“If you don’t mind...”

The door shut, and they were left alone.

Suddenly, Harry could not think of the words to say. He felt uncomfortable, and Dumbledore’s piercing gaze and the mutterings of the other portraits did not make it any better.

Ginny nudged him, and Harry realized that he’d been staring for longer than he’d expected.

“The price was too high,” Harry said heavily. He felt tears sting his eyes. Dumbledore *had* to know if it was possible. He *had* to.

“Oh, Harry...” The portrait leaned back in his chair.

“Is there any way... Do you know...” Harry took a deep breath. “We want to change it.”

Dumbledore was silent for a long time.

“We know a Time-Turner wouldn’t work,” Ron said gruffly. Ginny had started to shake again.

“We want to go back to the battle,” Harry said firmly.

“Why?” Dumbledore asked. He’d folded his hands together and pierced each of them with his gaze.

Harry’s mouth fell open. Wasn’t it obvious? “We want to save them, Dumbledore. We’re not... we can’t... We have to try! Is there —“

But Dumbledore interrupted him. "You misunderstand. Why go back to the battle? You could do very little. You might save one or two, but there would still be heavy losses."

Ginny stiffened.

"Is there a way or not?" Ron asked loudly. Harry felt like kicking him; they needed Dumbledore on their side!

"Yes," said Dumbledore.

Harry turned away and ran his hands through his hair. Ginny gave a wordless cry, and clapped her hand over her mouth. Ron was breathing heavily, as if he had just run a few kilometers.

"There is a way," Dumbledore continued. "There are several, actually, but only one that is advisable at this juncture. It isn't instant, of course; you will need to make several preparations, including a very complex potion, and complicated spell. You are lucky there are three of you. One man alone would find it nigh impossible."

"We'll do it," Harry said instantly. "Right now."

"Ah, but there is no 'right now' when it comes to this," Dumbledore told them. "You will need to prepare. The potion itself takes three years."

"Three *years*?"

"Not to mention there are certain decisions you must make regarding it. How far back you need to travel, for instance. That must be decided before you even begin to make the potion, for the amount of ingredients you will need will vary slightly."

"But... We want to go back three years," Harry said. "To the battle."

"I would not advise that," Dumbledore said. "This is not at all like a Time-Turner; there will not be two of each of you running around. You will find yourself as pressed and challenged as you were that night. The only thing that will be different is that your memories of this timeline will remain. You will know when and where things you wish

to stop happening will happen, but there is no guarantee that you will be able to."

"Are... you think we shouldn't do this?" Ginny asked tentatively. "Because we've already made up our minds."

"I very much think that you should do this, Mrs. Potter," Dumbledore's eyes twinkled like mad. "But if you're doing this, you should do it *right*. In for a knut, in for a galleon, I'd say."

"What the bloody hell does that mean?" Ron asked rudely.

"Hold on," Harry's mind worked frantically. "I think... Do you mean that we should go back *further*?"

"Excellent, Harry," Dumbledore looked as pleased as though he'd gotten good marks on a difficult essay. "If you go back far enough, you could *stop the final battle from happening at all*."

Harry thought back. They could go back to any point in the years that Harry, Ron, and Hermione had been searching for Horcruxes. He knew exactly where they were, it would've made it so much faster and easier to hunt them down and destroy them. Voldemort would have less time to amass his army, and the odds against those who chose to stand with Harry would not be so bleak. He could even be sure to save Remus and Tonks and Teddy from being murdered in their own home. But... what if he could go back to before Dumbledore had died? He could stop him from putting on the ring; Snape would not have needed to kill him, and Harry could have the brilliant wizard at his side. Or he could go back even further... *Sirius*. The battle in the Department of Mysteries could have been avoided, Harry knew full well that it would be a trap, he wouldn't even go. And if he went back to his fourth year, he could ensure that Voldemort did not rise at the time, and Cedric could survive.

Ron and Ginny were watching him cautiously, and Harry realized that he was beaming.

"I think we ought to go back to our first year," he told them. "We can take care of the Horcruxes, we can stop a lot of bad things from happening, and we can have years and years of preparing before

Voldemort is resurrected. Dumbledore,” he turned to the portrait. “Do you think I’ll still have a Horcrux inside me if I go back?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “The only things that will change are your memories. The prophecy will still exist, although I’d be curious to see if it changes at all. It is possible...”

Harry looked alarmed, but Dumbledore rushed to reassure him. “It will not change the essence of the prophecy, I don’t think. But I would not be surprised if the wording changed.”

“What is this method, Dumbledore?” Ginny asked.

“The potion is called the Tears of Merlin – he was the one who created it and, I believe, the only one to use it. The spell is called the Web, or the Bent Reality. It takes both to do it, they’re very clearly entwined with each other,” Dumbledore paused. “I would suggest that you plan extremely carefully what you intend to do. Write it all down. Go through it step by step before you even begin. You’ll be allowed some room, but your goals must be clear.”

“Er, why?” Ron asked.

“The key ingredients of the potion are your memories,” Dumbledore said quietly. “You’ll need to add as much of them as you can, everything you can offer. I would recommend speaking to others about their memories of the war, and add those in as well. All the knowledge you have will give you greater ammunition for your eleven-year-old selves.”

“So the potion involves our memories?” Harry asked. “Is it like a Pensieve?”

“Yes,” Dumbledore beamed at him. “Exactly. But once those memories are in the potion, you can’t access them, which is why you need to plan very, very carefully. I will, of course, be of all the help I can. The last memory you will offer will be making the potion. The only thing you won’t be able to take with you is the incantation for the spell.”

“And where can we find information on this?” Ron asked, and then added hopefully, “Do you have it memorized?”

“No, but you’ll find it in the Restricted Section in a slim book called *Memories Unbound*. It has an entire chapter.”

“Well,” Harry said finally. “It looks like we’ve got quite a lot of work to do.”

“If anyone can do it properly, it’ll be you three,” Dumbledore said. “I only have one thing to ask of you. Please tell me. I know,” he paused. “I know it made you angry that I kept things from you, Harry. And I do apologize –“

“Of course we’re going to tell you,” Harry grinned at him. “I’m not about to alienate one of my best allies.”

“We’d better get to work,” Ron said. “Three years starts now.”

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In the end, it took them four years of careful, plodding preparations. Despite their impatience, they knew they had to get this right. They had a lot to lose.

The black-haired man sat beside a red-haired woman whom he barely remembered, but for whom he felt an aching tenderness though he did not know why. Theoretically he knew that he and the woman and the red-haired man were working on something desperate. Something that kept them going even though they had no idea what. Sometimes they joked about it. He had the feeling that they used to joke a lot more.

Yesterday, the strange potion had crystallized. Three shards of what looked like translucent, glowing glass remained in the cauldron. The black-haired man wanted to touch it, even though he knew that that was the last thing he should do. It would ruin everything. But what, he asked himself, was everything? He knew that he would find the answers in the cauldron, but every time he thought of touching it, his heart constricted in his chest. The red-haired man asked him every

day if he knew why they couldn't touch it, but the black-haired man couldn't remember.

"We have to say the spell," the beautiful red-haired woman said. "It's ready."

"How do you know?" The black-haired man asked fearfully. "What if it isn't?"

"It says here in our notes," she replied. "I wrote this: 'when the potion crystallizes, it is time to use the spell. DO NOT TOUCH IT.'"

"All right," the red-haired man said. "We'll say the spell. I remember the spell, at least. Just not anything else."

"Isn't that what was supposed to happen?" the black-haired man asked. It frustrated him that he could not remember this man's name. He felt that he ought to know it, but his entire head felt like a gaping hole.

"Yes, we've written it all over here," the red-haired man said. "I wonder why we kept writing notes to ourselves."

"I don't know if we'll ever know."

"We should say it," The black-haired man said firmly. "Right now, before we forget anything else."

They clasped hands. The red-haired woman began a long incantation that sounded like a song. The two men joined in. They kept it up, even as the lights went out and the room darkened. The only light came from the cauldron.

The black-haired man watches as the shards of glass rose in the air and stuck to something that looked like a spider web made of tiny lights. It hurt his eyes, so he blinked. The room steadily darkened, and the woman's palm was sweating. The other man was shaking.

He heard a cry that lifted the hairs off his neck. He'd never heard anything like it. It seemed to last for a life-time, and then everything went completely dark. A strange thought echoed through his mind: *for*

always and always. Still gripping the others' hands, he tumbled forward into nothing.

Chapter 1 – The Headmaster

Harry Potter opened his eyes to find himself in a room he had not seen for well over a decade. Dudley's second bedroom looked remarkably the same, and Harry felt a strange sense of vertigo. He dug the heels of his hands against his eyes, and sat up straight. The moment of disorientation passed and he laughed out loud. They had done it! He, Ron, and Ginny had actually sent their memories back in time.

He looked down at his small hands with wonder. He stood up, tore off his clothes, and stood naked in front of a mirror. He was eleven years old again! He laughed until tears streamed down his face.

Aunt Petunia chose that moment to bang on his door. "Get ready! You'd better not make us late. You're lucky we're even taking you to that... that place."

He was eleven years old and heading off to Hogwarts for the very first time the second time around.

Everything was the same. The same breakfast, the same headlines on the newspaper Uncle Vernon read at the kitchen table, the same vacant expression in Dudley's eyes and the scream he gave when he saw Harry staring at him. The car ride was the same, and Uncle Vernon shouted the exact same words he had before.

And in what felt like no time at all, Harry was standing alone in front of the barrier to platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. He waited around, hoping to catch sight of the Weasleys. He felt some anxiety. The efforts may have placed him exactly where he wanted to be, but his wife and best mate might have had trouble.

"—packed with Muggles, of course," He heard Mrs. Weasley say, and spun around. There coming toward him was his favorite family in the world; they looked just as frazzled, but it was such a beautiful sight that Harry had to turn away to compose himself. He schooled his features, trying to look a little lost, and hoped that his anxiety would not be misinterpreted.

Percy strode forward rather pompously and disappeared beyond the barrier. The twins, after giving their mother trouble, did likewise. Harry watched them go, and hoped he didn't look like a maniac. He couldn't seem to stop himself from grinning wide enough that his cheeks felt like they were about to split.

"Excuse me," He said a bit shakily. "Do you know how to get through the barrier?"

"First time?" Mrs. Weasley asked kindly. "It's Ron's first time too." She gestured to her son, as if Harry did not know this boy almost as well as he knew himself.

Ron grinned, and when his mother looked away, winked at Harry. Harry grinned back.

"Best to do it at a bit of a run if you're nervous," Mrs. Weasley was saying. "Go on, you go first."

He passed through the barrier and immediately set off to find the empty compartment at the end of the train. His head swiveled back and forth; he drank in the sight of so many people he'd known and lost. Lee Jordan was there with his tarantula. Angelina Johnson screamed when he thrust it toward her while Katie Bell and a fifth year whose name escaped Harry looked on and laughed.

"I've lost my toad again, Gran," he heard Neville say to his formidable looking grandmother.

"Oh, Neville," she sighed. Harry covered his mouth to hide his grin.

He still struggled with his trunk, and was just about to levitate it when George came up.

"Need help with that?"

"Please," Harry said.

"Oi, Fred! C'mere and help," George called. Together, the three of them lifted it up. When Harry paused to wipe his forehead, Fred gasped.

“What’s that?” He pointed at Harry’s forehead where the lightning scar was highly visible.

“Blimey!” George noticed the same thing.

“It is!”

They stared at Harry, their mouths gaping.

“You’re Harry Potter!” They said in unison.

“Er, yeah, that’s me,” Harry replied.

They kept staring at him, but left when Mrs. Weasley called them. Harry, feeling a bit overwhelmed, threw himself down on the seat, making sure he had a good view of the Weasley family. He stared at Ginny, and she must have felt his gaze, because she lifted her eyes to him. Even from here he could see that she was crying. He wanted to jump off the train and hold her, but forced himself not to by taking deep breaths. He remembered very clearly what they had decided. They could not do anything at all suspicious, not until the time was right to tell them all.

“Ron’s been acting odd all day,” he heard Percy tell his mother loftily. “I think he’s nervous about Hogwarts. But don’t worry, Mum, I’ll take care of him. It’s my duty as a prefect.”

“Oh, are you a prefect, Perce?” Fred asked with an air of great surprise.

Harry laughed as they mocked their brother, and ducked his head when they mentioned meeting him.

“Are you sure it was him, Fred?” Mrs. Weasley asked. “How could you tell?”

“His scar,” George said. “It’s really there – like lightning.”

Ron found Harry a few minutes later just as the train was pulling away from the station. “Anyone sitting here?” He asked slyly.

Harry laughed. "Nope, just me."

His eyes fell on Wormtail, and he was glad to see that Ron had not made good on his threat to murder him as soon as possible. While it would've made Harry quite pleased to think that the man who had betrayed his parents to Voldemort and had, in the other time, murdered Daphne Greengrass and Dean Thomas, Wormtail had to live until Sirius could be freed.

He and Ron chatted idly for a time. Harry could not help but be impressed by Ron's ability to dissemble.

"You've got a big family," Harry observed.

"Yeah, they all went to Hogwarts, too," Ron replied. "My little sister is going to turn eleven, so next year she'll be at Hogwarts too. She cried all morning about it, actually. Says she wishes she could be with us too. But if I didn't know any better, I'd say she's a bit glad to have Mum and Dad around for one more year."

Harry gave him a grateful look. So Ginny had been crying, but Harry'd bet a hundred galleons that she was crying for completely different reasons.

"This is Scabbers," Ron held up the snoozing rat. "He's not much; he used to be my brother Percy's rat. Ginny almost killed him today, isn't that right, Scabbers? He was sleeping – he always sleeps – and she accidentally stepped on him," his face darkened. "At least I *think* it was an accident. She might've thought that I'd stay home if my pet was hurt."

Harry had to hide his laugh. He hoped she'd hurt him bad. "Poor Scabbers," he said solemnly.

The lunch trolley came and went. Harry once again bought plenty of snacks, although this time Ron threw his sandwiches out the window and ate chocolate frogs like there was no tomorrow.

Both he and Ron chatted idly, careful – very careful – not to say anything at all odd. While Scabbers had only been a rat until their third year, they could not afford to let Peter Pettigrew, betrayer of

friends and murderer of Muggles, hear anything suspicious. They knew very well that they walked a very narrow path.

They were also well aware that they'd be visited by old friends who had no idea who they were, so it did not come as a surprise (although Harry's stomach gave a jolt) when Neville Longbottom, last seen dead on the flagstones of Hogwarts, opened the door and poked his head in, so shy that he did not meet their eyes.

"Have either of you seen a toad? I've lost mine."

It was lucky that his eyes were averted, for Harry had a huge lump in his throat, and he could tell by the look in Ron's eyes that he was thinking the same.

"No," Harry said softly. "Sorry."

"Thanks, then," Neville disappeared.

Ron took several deep breaths, and glanced at Wormtail swiftly. "He scared me, popping out like that. I didn't even hear the door open."

"Me either," Harry winked. "I wonder what our classmates are like. He seems a nice enough sort." That didn't nearly cover it. Neville had been a champion and fearless when it came to defending his friends. This time around his life would not end in murder; he would not leave Hannah a widow less than a year after their marriage. He'd work with plants, have a bunch of round-faced babies, and live to be a doddering old man, and Harry would never, ever have to watch him die.

Harry shut his eyes.

He and Ron sat in silence for a long while; Harry suspected that his best mate had fallen into the same morass of disturbing memories that he had. Ron drew his wand after perhaps an hour and made vague flicking motions, while glancing hopefully at the door again and again. Harry knew what he was waiting for: Hermione.

She did not disappoint them. A short, bushy-haired, buck-toothed girl huffed in with Neville on her heels. "Have either of you seen a toad?" She asked bossily. "Neville's lost one."

For a moment, just a moment, Harry saw her on fire. He firmly pushed those memories away. "Er, sorry. We still haven't seen him."

"Oh, are you doing a spell?" She asked eagerly. She plunked down on the seat opposite Ron, next to Harry, and focused all her attention on the wand in Ron's hand.

"Uh, it's not a very good spell," Ron said. His hand was trembling a little. "My brothers, Fred and George taught me it."

Harry watched in amusement as Ron stuttered through that useless little rhyme the twins had taught him long ago just to torment him. Struck with inspiration, he eased his own wand out of his pocket and sent a wordless Stinging Hex at the treacherous rat.

The effect was immediate. Wormtail sprang up, hair raised, and ran squeaking around and around the compartment. Hermione, who had looked skeptical as soon as she heard the beginning of the rhyme, looked on with her mouth agape.

"That wasn't supposed to happen," Ron muttered. "He was supposed to turn yellow." It took several minutes and all three of them to catch the rat. "Sorry, Scabbers," he said. If Harry didn't know him as well as he did, he would have had no reason to doubt his sincerity. Hermione didn't even look at all suspicious.

"Well, that wasn't a very good spell, was it?" She asked haughtily. "I think you hurt the poor little thing."

"Nah," Ron said. "Look – he already went back to sleep!"

"I'm Hermione Granger," she announced. "And you are?"

"Ron Weasley."

"Harry Potter."

"Are you really?!" She sat up straight and stared at him, her eyes wide. "I've read all about you. You're in the *Greatest Wizarding Events in the 20th Century*, and all sorts of other books. The Chosen One who defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!"

What the *hell*? Harry nearly fell off his chair, and exchanged startled glances with Ron.

"Oh, honestly, don't you know?" Hermione asked, tilting her nose in the air. "If I were you, I'd have read everything I could about it. Everyone knows that you were the prophesied defeater of You-Know-Who."

"Oh, ha ha," Ron, obviously thinking very quickly, gave a shaky little laugh. "Of course he knows. Everyone knows."

"Yeah," Harry nodded, trying to look as though this was not completely new to him. "I was just surprised, that's all." Damn right. Since when was the prophecy common knowledge? His insides twisted with anxiety. *What else had changed?*

Hermione sniffed. "Good." She looked Harry up and down appraisingly. "I don't suppose you know the entire prophecy?"

Did he? "Er..."

"That's all right," she said, but looked disappointed. "You probably wouldn't tell me if you did. It's such a big secret."

Hermione chattered on for a while. Harry attempted to pay attention to her, but his thoughts were whirling and whirling inside his head. It was imperative that he speak to Dumbledore. Tonight, if possible.

From that point on the entire trip became much less pleasant, and not only because Malfoy had made his appearance, attempted to cozen up to Harry, and had taken exception to being rebuffed. Draco Malfoy had turned out to be not quite the arse Harry had expected, but that didn't mean that Harry liked him any better. He was still a foul bigot, just not a foul, bigoted murderer.

Ron and Harry were much more subdued when they got off the train and got in the boats. Seeing Hagrid had alleviated some of the tension, and seeing the excitement on so many of the faces of Harry's classmates – including several who had died in ways that plagued Harry with guilt – did more. But it was with a heavy heart that he sailed across the lake, and trudged up the stairs; it was not until Professor McGonagall, sane and upright, opened the door for them that Harry once again felt the fierce resolve that had driven him for the last four years.

Harry walked beside Ron into the Great Hall, and did not have to feign wonder. So many people here that he had thought lost! Dumbledore chatting, Snape scowling, and countless others alive and merry. It was almost too much. *Always and always*, he thought.

He desperately needed to talk to Ron. They had a lot to discuss (the prophecy, and how to let Ginny know about the change), and to plan (the finer details of the prank they were to pull on the Potions Master). He only hoped that they could detach themselves from the horde of first years long enough to make a break for the Room of Requirement. Harry felt almost naked without the Invisibility Cloak.

“Potter!” Professor McGonagall stared at him, her mouth a thin line. “I suggest you allow yourself to be Sorted!”

Ron snorted and pushed Harry forward.

He put on the Sorting Hat, feeling a bit nervous about the Hat's reaction. He had no idea how it would react, and Dumbledore's portrait had been almost as clueless. Voldemort had destroyed it after he'd used it to suffocate Neville Longbottom.

Ahhhhhh. It seemed to Harry that the Hat had sighed. He could almost feel it in his brain. *This is something... something beyond rare.* The Hat seemed not to be particularly eloquent when faced with something that surprised it. Harry felt the mad urge to laugh. *More rare than surviving a Killing Curse at the age of one?* He thought, knowing the Hat would hear.

The Hat was silent for a long time, longer than the first time, and Harry began to shift uncomfortably in his seat. *Don't you dare put me in Slytherin*, he warned it.

I ought to. I really ought to. I can see all the cunning in you, although of a different sort than I usually see. The ambition, the drive, is there as well, even if it is to prevent what happened... before. Not to mention the thirst to prove yourself.

Please. Harry felt as though he'd reached a new low, begging a Hat.

I think you're right. The Hat finally murmured. *It all comes down courage, doesn't it? I don't think I've seen the like in many a year.*

"GRYFFINDOR!" The Hat shouted.

Harry was far too relieved to notice that there were far more speculative glances than applauding hands this time around.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

"Blimey, Harry, that was close!" Ron threw himself down on a plush armchair that the Room of Requirement had manifested. They'd taken a brief detour to retrieve the wretched tiara Horcrux from the Room of Hidden Things. It had taken longer than expected, but Harry held it in his hand. "You were up there for almost fifteen minutes!"

"You were up there for almost ten," Harry said sourly. "At least we're in Gryffindor, mate."

"That was way too close," Ron agreed.

"Speaking of close, we can't stay long."

"Percy would hang us," Ron smiled fondly. "You know, I'd almost forgotten how pompous he was."

"Is," Harry said quietly.

"I can't believe we actually did it, Harry," Ron said seriously. "I wasn't sure..."

"We're here," They grinned at each other madly, and Harry once again felt on the verge of tears. But he forced himself to not get too complacent. Having everyone back was amazing, but they had to move forward with purpose. "But what exactly have we done?"

"I have no idea," Ron shook his head. "It seems like a small sort of change, honestly. And Hermione said that no one knew all of it, so the you-being-a-Horcrux thing is probably safe."

Harry shuddered. "Can you imagine what Voldemort would've done if he'd known?"

"No," Ron said. "And I don't want to think about that. But... it makes me wonder what else has changed. Makes me wish we'd come back a few days earlier, maybe we could've figured some of this stuff out."

"Without being here and worrying about Quirrell," Harry agreed. He made a face. "I'm glad I didn't have to be around the Dursleys that much. It was kind of cool to realize that, yes, they really are total arses. But any more of them and I'd feel sick. I've got to put up with it over the summers."

"Yeah," Ron looked thoughtful, and Harry had to laugh. "What?"

"Just that I never saw that expression on your face until at *least* second year last time."

Ron threw a pillow at him.

"We're going to have to wait until we speak to Dumbledore," Harry turned the conversation back to more serious matters. "You can write a letter to Ginny tonight, though, and give her a heads-up."

"Yeah, that's what I reckon too," Ron replied. He looked down at his watch. "We've got to go. They'll be suspicious if we don't turn up soon. Not to mention we've got to nick those Dungbombs from the twins."

They rose to go, but Harry halted. "Is it bad to be looking forward to all the trouble we're going to cause tomorrow?"

Ron snorted. “No. Is it bad to be having impure thoughts about an eleven year old girl?”

Harry laughed. "It's better than thinking the same about a ten year old."

"We've become very perverted, Harry."

HPHPHPHPHPHP

Dear Ginny,

I'll bet you're surprised I'm writing you already! The Express was amazing. We saw loads of cool people. By 'we', I mean Harry Potter. Yes, The Harry Potter, the one you want to marry. He's a cool bloke, and he asked me if that red-haired little girl (you, in case you're too thick to realize it) was my sister. I think he fancied you. Anyway, this girl Hermione Granger came in and started talking all about that prophecy. She asked him if he knew what it was, and I don't think he did.

We tried our very first bit of magic, too. We meant to turn Scabbers yellow with that spell Fred and George taught us, but instead it hurt him, and he ran squeaking all around the compartment. I thought it was funny, but I didn't want to hurt the rat's feelings, so I didn't laugh.

Harry and I are in Gryffindor! I was hoping that would happen, but it took the Sorting Hat – yes, it's a harmless hat, we didn't have to battle a troll at all – about twice as long to Sort us as it did everyone else.

Anyway, I've got to go wash. I smell like Fred and George!

Ron

P.S. Say hi to Auntie Muriel for me (and try to steal her tiara!)

H P H P H P H P H P H P H P H P

Time marched swiftly the next day. Transfiguration and Charms went well, Harry had to say. He'd been quite nervous about being in a first-

year class, pretending not to know spells that he'd mastered sixteen years previously. There was a fine balance between looking suspiciously genius and suspiciously stupid, but Harry thought he'd done all right.

Ron, walking beside him on their way to Potions, looked disgruntled. He'd been a bit more lax than Harry, and had tried to impress Hermione. Harry had wanted to laugh at the look on his face when she'd *still* managed to turn her match into a needle before he had.

"Cheer up, mate," He said in a low voice. "She'll always keep you on your toes."

"At least we get to torture Snape now," Ron muttered.

They filed in with the rest of their classmates, and Ron managed to find a seat next to Hermione without making it look intentional. Snape, black cloak billowing behind him, made quite the entrance, and glared at those who were too thick to realize that he was not a teacher to annoy with unapproved chatter.

What happened next startled Harry.

It was word for word identical as the last time. Snape attempted to humiliate him, of course, by pointing out his celebrity status. The thoughtful crease in the Professor's brow, however, Harry was pretty sure was different. He then was practically interrogated by the man, and asked questions that he knew for sure that no other first year student (besides Hermione, of course) would know.

His own reaction to it was different. Not on the outside, Harry made sure to fidget and say 'I don't know' a lot. But his emotional reaction was quite different. The first time around, he'd felt badgered, confused, and furious. This time, he felt an odd sort of kinship with the man. Snape had lost the one person he'd cared about: Harry's mother. The fact that he'd lost her years before she'd died was immaterial. The loss had devastated him, had turned him bitter, and he'd been broken. But when all was said and done, and Harry had viewed his memories (too late, far too late), he had realized that Snape was quite possibly the bravest man he'd ever met.

He was so lost in thought that he nearly forgot to give Ron the cue. He elbowed him sharply.

Ron stood up immediately and shouted, "What the bloody hell is wrong with you, you greasy git?"

"Yeah!" Harry stood up too. That probably would've done it, but they had to be sure that Snape would be furious enough to want to them expelled, and have enough ammunition to actually make a case of it. "Slimeball!"

That's why they each reached into the pockets of their robes, pulled out a handful of Dungbombs, and threw them on the floor at Snape's feet.

The reaction was immediate. The other students lurched to their feet, covering their mouths and noses, and ran for the door. Hermione, retching and glaring at them, followed suit.

Snape did not move. He stood in front of them, staring at them, and his face grew angrier and angrier by the second. The room seemed to grow colder.

"I would take points from Gryffindor," he spoke without moving his lips. "But you *will* be expelled for this. Come with me, the Headmaster has that happy authority."

Harry and Ron marched in front of him, and glad of it because neither one could help smirking. Snape had fallen right into their hands. No matter how brave he was, and how much Harry had regretted not trusting him, it still felt pretty good.

"Ugh! What's that *smell*?" The students rushed to get out of the way and stared after them. Harry could hear Snape growling threats under his breath.

It seemed to take no time at all to get to the familiar gargoyle.

"Lemon Drops," Snape hissed. It jumped aside. "Up. Now."

Snape pushed them roughly out of the way and pounded on the heavy door. "DUMBLEDORE!"

"Enter," Dumbledore's voice. "What is it, Severus? Is it Qui—*Ah*."

Harry stared at the floor, marshalling his thoughts and fighting back tears. He hadn't seen Dumbledore alive for an entire decade, and he was their absolute best chance. He, Ron, and Ginny had become pretty powerful, but Dumbledore was formidable, both with his wand and with his mind. He could tell them where the holes in their plans were. He could make it air-tight. Harry hadn't known how much of a relief it would be.

He peeked, and saw Dumbledore's face as he heard a slightly exaggerated (although it wasn't really necessary, what he and Ron had done was damning enough) version of events from Snape. He did not look angry, but he did have a look on his face that Harry couldn't read.

"The Weasley boy called me a greasy git, and Potter called me a slimeball, right before they threw the Dungbombs," Snape said with relish.

After a long, long moment, Dumbledore said very quietly, "Look at me."

Ron, who'd been shaking with silent laughter for the last several minutes, stopped and looked up. Despite the fact that they pretty much knew that they weren't going to be in serious trouble (well, they knew that they wouldn't be expelled), Harry could see apprehension on his friend's face.

"You've done serious damage today," Dumbledore said to the both of them. Several portraits on the walls agreed. "Bring back corporal punishment, and send them back home with bloody backs," Phineas Nigellus suggested laconically. Snape appeared to agree wholeheartedly.

"Enough, Phineas," Dumbledore held up a hand to silence the portrait of Sirius' ancestor, and Hogwarts' least popular headmaster. "The two of you have shown blatant disregard for authority, caused the

Potions classroom to be evacuated, disrupted class, and did it with Dungbombs, a substance banned at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please explain to me why you did this.”

“You’re letting them explain?” Snape asked, horrified. “Just expel them and be done with it!”

“Severus. I see no possible explanation that would save them from being expelled,” Dumbledore seemed a little sad as he peered at Harry.

“I do,” Ron said loudly. Snape looked ready to murder him, but then he pinned a glare on Harry so malevolent that Harry actually took a step backward.

“You knew it could go both ways, Dumbledore,” Snape sneered. “This only proves it. We’ve got another Dark Lord, not a bloody savior!”

Harry and Ron exchanged uncertain glances, and Harry had a sneaking suspicion that the prophecy was very, very different here.

After that moment of confusion, Ron laughed out loud.

“And not to forget the loyal follower,” Snape said. Dumbledore said nothing, but appeared to be deep in thought. “It explains much. The reason why he’s *marked as an equal!*”

This time, Harry laughed. It burst out of him, he couldn’t stop it. He felt bitterness and incredulity, and that’s where part of the laughter came from, the part that also wanted to cry. The majority of it, however, was simply because it was *funny*. Ron laughed with him, and Harry feared that they both sounded quite, quite mad. He couldn’t wait to hear Ginny’s reaction.

With an effort, Harry stopped. He wiped his eyes, adjusted his robes and, feeling more confident, met Dumbledore’s eyes. The brilliant blue eyes did not have even a trace of the familiar twinkle (in fact, Dumbledore looked concerned, perplexed, and quite angry), but Harry felt comforted nonetheless.

"We did it so we could come up here and talk to you without suspicion," Harry said.

"Yeah, sorry about the things we said. And about the Dungbombs," Ron chuckled. "I don't really think you're a greasy git."

"And I don't think you're a slimeball," Harry added.

"They're lying!" Snape shouted, outraged. "Dumbledore, don't listen to them!"

"Well, yeah, you're a bit of a greasy git," Harry heard the fondness in Ron's voice, but he didn't think the other two did because they found themselves thrown into rapidly conjured chairs and tied there with ropes made of what looked like liquid magic. Harry settled himself more comfortably.

"You are trying my patience," Dumbledore said coldly.

"Nice wand," Harry said pointedly.

"They're both mad," Snape said, sounding triumphant. "That's what the 'bent' line meant. Potter's unhinged, and he took Weasley with him."

"Hold a moment, Severus. Why on earth did you want to see me without anyone knowing?"

"We're not mad, Professor," Harry said. He'd started to tremble a little.

"Yeah, but you've got to promise to listen to us," Ron added.

"I do not believe you gentlemen are in any position to make demands. Speak quickly."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Ron asked Harry.

"Yes," Harry said. They both turned to stare at the wand Dumbledore held. He was not pointing it at them, but they both knew that Dumbledore was very, very fast.

"He just might use the Elder Wand on us," Ron said.

“Oh, honestly,” Snape said scathingly. He turned to Dumbledore. Harry had to admire the shuttered expression on the older man’s face that masked the surprise he must be feeling. Absurd pride bubbled up inside him.

“Explain,” He said again, but in a different tone. It was a mixture of danger and confusion.

“We’re from the future,” Ron said cheerfully.

Snape pulled out his wand, rushed over to stand in front of Ron, and pointed it straight at his head.

“Stand down, Severus,” Dumbledore said. He had risen from his chair. “I’m almost certain the boys are mad. But they knew that I have the Elder Wand and I *will* know why.”

Snape’s wand clattered to the floor. “You have the *Elder Wand*? Isn’t that a fairy tale?”

“No,” Dumbledore said. “The Deathly Hallows are very real.”

“Yeah, and you have another one, don’t you?” Ron smirked. “Where’s Harry’s Cloak?”

Dumbledore sat down heavily. “Why?”

“You’re still asking for explanations when these two should have been expelled ten minutes ago and sent on their merry way,” Snape said, but he still looked unsettled.

“I think if he asked ‘how’ he’d get a truthful answer and a reason for the ‘bent’ line as well,” Harry said quietly. They’d had their fun, and now it was time for the truth.

Dumbledore’s brow furrowed.

“We used the Tears of Merlin,” Harry continued. The wizard lifted his head up sharply.

“Impossible, the Tears of Merlin is just a fairy tale,” Snape said.

“Yeah, just like the Deathly Hallows,” Ron told him.

“It is possible, Severus,” Dumbledore’s expression was absolutely unreadable. “But I am not yet sure if I believe them. Prove it.”

Harry closed his eyes, wishing that he did not have to do this, but the portrait of the man sitting in front of him had told him that this was what he must do, if Dumbledore required incontrovertible proof. And with all the gentleness he was capable of, he said, “You see Ariana in the Mirror of Erised. And the family you lost. Your father, dead in Azkaban, because he avenged what the three Muggle boys did to your sister. Your mother who died accidentally because of your sister. Your sister, dead because she got in the middle of a duel between three boys. Your brother, who has never, ever trusted you since then. They all stand there before you, smiling, and you know that they’ve forgiven you for your mistakes. And there’s someone else there. You also see,” he licked his lips. “You also see a man who never existed. A kind Gellert Grindelwald –“

“ENOUGH!” Snape shouted. “What is this vile madness you’re sprouting, Potter?”

Harry could not bear to see the pain on Dumbledore’s face. He looked away.

“Why?”

It had worked, Harry thought. Or Dumbledore thought he meant to torment him, and was asking why he would do such a thing. But Harry placed his bet on the latter, and so gave the same answer he had given the portrait four years ago.

“The price was too high,” Harry told him.

“You won?” Dumbledore asked sharply.

“No,” Ron said firmly. “Harry defeated Voldemort. But we lost everyone else except for my sister. She’s here too. Well, not here. I expect she’s at the Burrow.”

“Dumbledore?” Snape asked.

“Severus, what Harry said could only have come from my own mouth. I have to believe him.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said. “Your portrait –“

“My portrait?” Dumbledore interrupted. “I did not survive?”

“No, Snape killed you,” Ron sad bluntly.

“I would *never* –“

“You would if you knew that Dumbledore was dying, surrounded by Death Eaters, and by his own command. Fenrir Greyback was there, as well as Bellatrix Lestrange,” Harry replied. He looked away, remembering that death, and how it had shaped the years of the Horcrux hunt, and how things might have been different if he had only known. This time it would be different. He turned back to Dumbledore, who suddenly looked very, very old. “Please tell me the prophecy. I already know there are differences.”

“What was your prophecy?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry told him, and his voice only shook a little when he stated the part that meant he was a Horcrux. He knew this time, though. It wouldn’t be too late.

“It is... very similar,” Dumbledore said. “The one in the here and now is this: *The Chosen One with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have terrible power the Dark Lord knows not... he has been bent for always and always... and either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives.*”

Harry started to cry. Not sobs, not like the kind he’d experienced in the months after the final battle, not great gasping things that shook his entire body and made him feel worse. But tears slid down his face rapidly, and he knew without having to look that Ron did the same thing.

For always and always.

Snape was surprisingly tactful, although Harry thought he might be too stunned to speak. He and Dumbledore said nothing until the two men who had been Bent for always and always had composed themselves.

"Sorry," Harry said shakily. "That was unexpected. Very unexpected."

"Which part?" Dumbledore inquired.

"His prophecy sounds an awful lot like ours, but with the bits about his questionable loyalties taken out," Snape said, but it didn't sound like he really meant it.

"Bent doesn't mean mad," Ron said. "That's the name of the spell that went with the potion. The Bent Reality spell, although I suppose it's more of a charm."

"What does it mean?" Dumbledore asked. "'Bent for always and always.' Do you know?"

"Yes," Harry breathed. "We were Bent for always and always." It felt very personal, speaking of this.

"And what, precisely, is 'always and always'?"

"It's you," Harry said simply. "And you, I suppose. And Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Bill and Fleur Weasley. Charlie Weasley. Percy Weasley. Fred and George Weasley. Hermione Granger. Neville Longbottom. Dean Thomas. Remus Lupin. Dora Lupin. Teddy Lupin. Luna Lovegood. Colin Creevey, Cho Chang, Cedric Diggory, and Viktor Krum."

"Angelina Johnson, my brother's fiancée. Katie Bell, Lisa Turpin. All Ravenclaw students, most Hufflepuff students, most Gryffindors. Even some Slytherins. Professor McGonagall, Professor Sprout, Professor Burbage, Professor Trelawney, and Professor Vector," Ron continued. "Dobby the house-elf. Firenze and Magorian, the centaurs. Rufus Scrimgeour and Cornelius Fudge."

“Ted and Andromeda Tonks.” Each name felt like a weight on their soul, but they continued until they listed all the names they could remember. Dumbledore looked horrified and Snape looked arrested.

“Emmeline Vance, Elphias Doge, and Amelia Bones,” Harry paused. “There are many, many more. People we never even knew who were targeted and killed. I don’t even know how many countless Muggles. Almost the entire generation... Professor Flitwick spoke the eulogy at the mass memorial ceremony, and he said that the entire flower of a generation had been lost. The statistics came later. Some forty percent of the entire Wizarding population was either killed or incapacitated, and that does not include the Muggle-born children who were not allowed to go to Hogwarts; that number is unknown, their bodies never found. All of Hogwarts was awash with blood. *The price was too high.*”

There was a very long moment of stunned silence. Snape’s face was completely gray, and Dumbledore had his head in his hands.

“Always and always is our anthem,” Ron said. “It’s hard to explain.”

“It means love, and all the people we love who we *will not lose again!*” Harry realized that he was almost shouting. The slender ropes that had bound him had fallen away, and he had risen to his feet without even knowing it.

Dumbledore was at a loss for words, but his eyes shone with fierce pride and hope. Even Snape looked moved; he was gaping at Harry. Ron stood beside him, just as erect, just as proud.

“Do you...” Dumbledore began. “I have my suspicions... but do you know what the rest of the prophecy means?”

“Whatever you’re thinking, you’re probably right,” Ron told him.

“A bit of his soul was stuck in me. He couldn’t die unless... well, unless I did,” Harry said. Knowledge too late then, but not now.

“Harry survived the Killing Curse again,” Ron said proudly.

“So he’s definitely made a Horcrux?” Dumbledore asked. “I suspected when I saw you after he murdered your parents.”

“What’s a Horcrux?” Snape asked, lost. Dumbledore explained quickly. “So that’s what Regulus knew... He said something very odd before he disappeared...”

“No,” Harry said. “He did not make a Horcrux.”

Ron laughed bitterly. “He made *seven* Horcruxes, counting Harry.”

“Oh, Merlin,” Dumbledore breathed.

Harry withdrew the tiara from the inner pocket of his robes. “We have one, and we know, roughly, where the others are. I think I might be able to Apparate either of you to one of them, and the others won’t be too difficult to manage.”

“Harry, I think I need some time,” Dumbledore said quietly. “Give one week. Please. I need to think about all that you’ve told me.”

Harry understood. He put the tiara back in his pocket, surprised that he was allowed to do so. Dumbledore was overwhelmed, he could tell. He remembered very clearly how he’d felt when he’d learned that Voldemort had mutilated and maimed himself beyond all usual evil, and how that task had seemed so vast and impossible.

“Professors, if I may add one more thing,” Harry said tentatively. “There is one name that was not on that list we gave you, a name very important to me.”

Ron stared at Snape. “You’re not going to like it.”

“I don’t think I could possibly be more surprised than I am right now,” Snape murmured.

“Yeah, you can.”

“My godfather, Sirius Black, currently imprisoned in Azkaban for crimes he did not commit,” Harry said grimly.

"You were right, Weasley," Snape said after a moment, his lips very thin and his eyes wide. "I wouldn't think that you, Potter, would forgive the crime of Lily and James' betrayal."

"I didn't," Harry assured him. "My dad, Sirius Black, and Peter Pettigrew were all unregistered animagi. They wanted to keep Remus company when he changed. When Sirius hunted Wormtail – Pettigrew – down after he sold out my parents to Voldemort, Wormtail was the one who killed the Muggles. He transformed into a rat and escaped through the sewers. And I assure you that I did not forgive him."

"Harry killed him eventually," Ron said helpfully. "Harry caught Pettigrew right after the effing rat tortured Minerva McGonagall into insanity."

"Let's hope we can find him before he commits that crime," Dumbledore said.

Ron laughed. "Oh, we know exactly where he is. He's down in my dorm room right now, probably chewing on my sheets."

"I need to sit down," Snape said.

Dumbledore shook his head, as though clearing cobwebs, an unguarded gesture that Harry suspected he allowed few to see. "We need to think of an excuse, Severus. They were right. There will be no expulsion. But we can't allow them to get away with it. None of the teachers would believe it, and I suspect everyone in the whole school knows exactly what happened."

Snape was silent for so long that Harry began to fear that he would insist on expelling them. His fears were unfounded. "I suspect that students have been brewing illicit potions," he said carefully. "I know of several that would inspire madness, I suggest the Confuzzle Draught. They will have detention with me every Saturday for a month. And twenty points from Gryffindor, ostensibly because they were stupid to take a potion they didn't know, but really because in a few minutes they will be greeted as heroes in the Gryffindor common room."

“Snape knows how to keep us humble,” Ron said.

Harry laughed. “He always did.”

Chapter 2 – Hallows and Halloween

It was with mild trepidation that Harry and Ron entered the dungeons the following Saturday to serve their first detention with Professor Snape. Snape's words had come to pass. Harry and Ron had gone back to the common room to find a hero's welcome. They'd been pulled in by the twins who had showered Ron with praise for being a true younger brother to them. The older students had been stunned and impressed, and Harry had felt a little fissure of warmth that even his fellow first years (excepting Hermione) had forgiven them for what Seamus called 'mass projectile vomiting.' A burly fifth year had even congratulated them for what he said was a prank for the ages. Over the past days – even when it came out that they had run afoul of an illegal potion called the Confuzzle Draught – their fellow Gryffindors had followed them around in crowds.

This grated at Snape's temper, and he had said some very vicious things to the two of them that they hoped were only for the sake of appearances. Unfortunately, they couldn't be sure.

"Are you sure he's not going to make us disembowel frogs again?" Ron asked anxiously for the seventeenth time.

"No," Harry replied, just as anxious. Just yesterday, Snape had called him a four-eyed madman who ought to be put out of his misery.

They found Snape standing before his desk. On it was a thick cauldron full of what looked like Polyjuice Potion. Did Snape have some sort of humiliating task involving transforming into someone horrible planned?

"No need to give me that look, Potter," Snape snapped. "I'll explain when our guest arrives."

"I'm here, Severus," said Dumbledore, whipping off an Invisibility Cloak that looked very familiar. "I arrived just before they did. Allow me to secure the room."

He then performed some rather complicated spells. Harry recognized most of them; he'd spent enough time in hiding that he was very familiar with spells of protection. But some he didn't.

"I should not have let you leave when I did on Monday," Dumbledore said quietly. "I was quite overwhelmed, to be honest. Do you still have the Horcrux?"

"Yeah," Harry brought it out and looked at it with distaste. "I had it in my trunk."

"Was that wise?"

"Wiser than keeping it on your person," Ron muttered darkly. He had certainly not forgotten the influence of the locket; it had led to him abandoning Harry and Hermione. "Trust me."

"If you spend too much time with them they start to change you," Harry added, patting Ron on the shoulder. "I secured my trunk as best I could."

Dumbledore seemed to accept this explanation and moved on. "I've been attempting to find a way to speak to you before this, but you always had your admirers with you."

Snape scowled.

"Were you trying to get us mad enough to do something about it in class?" Ron asked curiously. "So you could take us to Dumbledore again?"

"No," Snape said shortly.

"There's so much to ask," Dumbledore said ruefully. "I was obviously not thinking clearly when I told you I needed a week. I regretted that within hours. Tell me... do you know how to destroy a Horcrux?"

"Of course," Harry said. "We destroyed all of them. We simply didn't have the means to do so. I thought about going to the Chamber, but we couldn't seem to get away long enough."

“And we didn’t think you’d want us to unleash Fiendfyre on Hogwarts grounds.”

“Excellent deduction, Mr. Weasley,” Dumbledore nodded approvingly. “Now what is this Chamber?”

“The Chamber of Secrets,” Ron replied, as though it was obvious. “It’s got a ruddy Basilisk in it. Harry destroyed his first Horcrux with a fang. Hermione destroyed another one years later the same way.”

“The Chamber of Secrets?” Snape asked faintly.

“They do have a way of bringing myths and fairy tales to life, don’t they?” Dumbledore asked quietly. “I think we’ve got our task for the evening, Severus. We’ll all go kill the Basilisk.”

“Actually,” Harry said, equally quiet. “We’re not sure if that’s wise. Certain events *must* happen the way they happened last time.” And he told them every detail of it, with Ron’s help and input. “So we think that Ginny has to do it. It has to happen the same way. We can, of course, take every precaution that no one is Petrified. But the Sword of Gryffindor needs to be impregnated with Basilisk venom. That’s the only safe way to get rid of the Horcruxes, especially if we’re unable to get to the fangs.”

“That’s... very wise,” Dumbledore said thoughtfully.

“Your portrait helped us,” Ron told him. “Ginny will have a coin or something that she’ll charm so that the coins Harry and I will carry will send us a message when she starts writing in the diary. Every time.”

“You don’t like this idea,” Snape said suddenly, staring at Harry.

“No, I hate it,” Harry replied. “There’s a risk, even with every precaution. If I lost Ginny...”

“They’re married,” Ron said in a stage-whisper.

“What’s the Polyjuice Potion for?” Harry asked curiously. It was too weird to talk about his ten year old wife with Dumbledore and Snape listening in.

"It's for when we Apparate to the cave you mentioned," Snape said. He looked equally grateful for the diversion of topic. "I think we all agree that this must be done in the utmost of secrecy? I can't be seen anywhere near it. And neither can you," He paused. "Do I want to know how you knew what it was?"

"We snuck into your personal storeroom last time, nicked the more sensitive ingredients, and used it to infiltrate the Slytherin common room to find out if Draco Malfoy was the Heir of Slytherin," Ron grinned. He appeared to be enjoying himself a great deal. Harry couldn't blame him. He was too.

"Then we used it when we broke into both the Ministry of Magic and Gringotts," Harry informed them, grinning. "We've used it loads of times."

"I think I'll give you another detention just for that," Snape said, aggravated.

"I think," Dumbledore said suddenly. "That we should spend this detention merely talking. There's so much that we didn't cover..."

Harry and Ron looked at each other, relieved, and began to speak. They told them as much as they could, up until their third year, with the promise of continuing on the following Saturday. But it was growing late, and not even Snape would keep them much longer without arousing protests from the other professors.

"I trust you can find a suitable punishment for yourselves?" Snape raised one eyebrow.

"Yeah. I think we just spent the last few hours disemboweling frogs without gloves," Ron said. "And that wouldn't even be a lie, you made us do that once."

"In the interest of having a free Saturday sometime before Christmas, I suggest you do not tell him what you did to earn that," Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "Harry. Take this," He held out the Cloak. "Use it well."

"I will," Harry promised. "I'm hungry. I'll use it to sneak into the kitchens."

We've been back for nearly a week and I still can't believe this miracle. Mum and Dad are wonderful, just like we remembered. Bill

stopped by for breakfast last Wednesday (apparently he was in the country for some sort of Gringotts business) and I fell off my chair.

I've been on the verge of tears for almost every minute of every day. And I'm not even at Hogwarts where I can see more people besides Mum, Dad, and a brother or two. Tell me all about your talk with Dumbledore and Professor Snape. What is this prophecy, and why does everyone know it? You don't think it's anything to really worry about, do you? And, if so, what are we going to do about it? I wanted to ask Mum about it, but what if it's suspicious? Also, she's very, very angry with Ron for the prank the two of you pulled (I'd pay loads of galleons to have been able to watch). If the letter from Dumbledore hadn't arrived soon after Percy's, Ron would've gotten a Howler.

(Tell Ron to stop reading this now) Harry, I miss you. You did very well at the train station, but that moment you looked at me from the compartment, I just wanted to run to you and hold you. Can you imagine Mum's reaction? These past few days at the Burrow have been happier than I could have guessed; the only thing missing is you. Four years is a long time to wait...

I charmed this parchment (obviously), and I'm writing this in the dead of night. Mum isn't suspicious at all, but she would be if I was to strike up a secret correspondence. For now, I think it best if you keep writing the way you two did with the first letter (and good job, boys, with the subtlety).

I love you both, always and always,

Ginny

Harry smiled, even though he ached to see her. He wished he could take his quill and write her the sort of love letter that he wanted and send Hedwig back to the Burrow, but she was right. Still, he carefully folded the parchment and stuck it in his trunk. He cast a spell to make it look blank, to protect it and keep it safe.

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The Saturday detentions went well, although they talked rather than did anything with the Horcruxes. Professor Dumbledore had brought

down his Pensieve which made the telling much faster and easier. Not to mention that there might have been miscommunication or misunderstandings; the Pensieve allowed the two older men to view the memories objectively.

Snape emerged, ashen, one night. "You could have *warned* me, Potter! Do you have any idea how bizarre it felt to be flying through the air with no means of support while you two and that Granger girl flew on the back of a dragon?"

"It felt pretty bizarre to fly on the dragon, actually," Harry told him. "Now how do you two suppose we get the cup from Gringotts?"

They continued in that manner to hone the plan, fine-tune it, and make sure that they left themselves enough leeway to change it if they must. Dumbledore's portrait had been right to insist that they tell his living counterpart. Harry could not imagine doing it any other way. Still, this time around it was different, and Harry was grateful. Dumbledore had been mindful of his childhood, and had sought to protect him, even if Harry had had cause to resent it. This Dumbledore treated Harry as an equal, and Ron too. It was very refreshing.

The only blight on the days leading up to Halloween came from a source that Harry ought to have expected.

Hermione.

It bothered Ron quite a lot. He did not like deceiving her (for that matter, neither did Harry), but they couldn't possibly tell her the secret. Not yet, and not for a long time. But whatever misgivings he had about it, Ron's were even worse. He didn't speak of it much, but the look on his face when he stole glances at Hermione was that of wistful longing.

Harry actually looked forward to the troll, the instance that would bind them in friendship. He tried very hard not to think about Hermione aflame.

But Ron's thoughts were not the only problem. This Hermione still had a keen and penetrating mind, and she was suspicious. She'd

grilled them one night for fifteen very uncomfortable minutes outside the library. She asked them to describe the effects of the Confuzzle Draught, to describe exactly where and when they ran into it, and all sorts of leading questions that made Ron break out into a cold sweat.

"I don't believe you," Hermione said after Harry had stammered out an answer.

"*Dumbledore* believes us!"

"Yes," Hermione said slowly. "But that doesn't change the facts. I was with you for pretty much the entire day. I didn't see anyone give you a suspicious potion. Besides, the Confuzzle Draught doesn't work for more than thirty minutes. I was walking behind you. And until you stood up and threw Dungbombs, you didn't act at all odd."

"Even confuzzled, Snape was a bit frightening, I reckon," Harry explained again.

"You can't control the confuzzling effects," Hermione told them sternly.

"Listen," Harry said. "Snape just said it was the most likely possibility. Maybe it was some other potion."

Hermione's mouth twisted with suspicion. "I don't believe either of you. And I can't *imagine* why *Dumbledore* would go along with this."

"Snape hates us," Ron said flatly. "He wouldn't try to get us out of trouble by lying! He'd get us *into* trouble by lying!"

"No," Hermione shook her head. "You need to be honest. And Ron, don't come to me for help with Transfiguration again."

She swept away, clutching her books, and looking very formidable for one so young. Harry and Ron watched her go.

"I *hate* this!" Ron kicked the wall. One of the portraits looked at him reprovingly. He made a face at it. "I didn't really mean that," He said quietly as they walked down the empty hall. "I just... I'm looking forward to Halloween."

"Me too," Harry agreed.

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Harry looked wistfully out the window toward the Quidditch pitch and wished, for the hundredth time, that he could have justified playing again all through his years at Hogwarts. But he couldn't. He supposed he might have this year – ensuring that Quirrell did not retrieve the Philosopher's Stone did not really interfere with Quidditch, except in that last match – but he would not put Ginny in any more danger than he had to, and Quidditch was a distraction he could not afford. He smiled fondly, remembering the blazing argument.

"What do you mean you aren't going to play Quidditch because you'd be too worried?" Ginny asked angrily, tossing her long red hair over her shoulder. "Ron can be there when you aren't. I don't need to be taken care of, Potter!"

Yes, you do, thought Harry, but he knew enough not to make his wife even angrier. "Quidditch will take up too much time. I think it would be dangerous to play, especially during second year."

"Dangerous for me, you mean," Ginny's eyes narrowed. "I'm a fairly talented witch, Harry."

"Talent has nothing to do with it!" He shouted suddenly, and her eyes widened. "Voldemort will be enough of a danger, without his pet. The Basilisk can kill anyone and anything with just a look. And if you think that I'm going to endanger you – and anyone else, but most especially you – by flying in the air on a broom while the Basilisk is still alive, you're dead wrong."

Ginny looked annoyed. "You just ruined my anger for me."

"Good," He grinned. "You know I'm right. You're a very talented witch, love, but you can't speak Parseltongue."

She hugged him. "Promise me you won't lock me away to protect me."

"Never," He said. "We're in this together. I need you."

But that was almost four years ago, and Harry hadn't known how much of a disappointment it would be for him to be on the ground while his old team – plus a small seventh year who played Seeker – flew high in the sky.

Today was Halloween, though, and he couldn't afford to let himself be distracted.

Breakfast was normal; even though Ron fidgeted with nerves and agitation, he still managed to eat enough food that Hermione watched him from a few seats away with a look of disgust on her face. Here was the problem. Ron absolutely refused to say anything to make her cry enough to go hide in the girls' loo. Harry couldn't blame him, but he wished that Ron was a little more pragmatic and a little less chivalrous. Harry would have to do it himself.

In the end, he didn't have to. Ron betrayed his nerves by sending his feather zooming into the air on his first try with a perfectly executed *Wingardium Leviosa*. Flitwick clapped his hands, delighted, and gave Gryffindor ten points. Hermione looked angry, but chose not to mention anything until they exited the classroom.

"Good job on the charm, Ron," She said viciously. "Think you can do it again to earn enough points for you and Harry to make up for what you did what you were... confuzzled?"

It was the first time she'd spoken to either of them since the day outside the library. Ron opened his mouth, at a loss for words. Harry was about to say something mean, his insides twisting.

"Shut up, know-it-all," Lavender Brown said haughtily. "It wasn't their fault. No wonder you haven't got any friends!"

Several things happened at once. Hermione's face scrunched up and she fled; Harry prayed that she'd find her way to the same loo; and Ron rounded on Lavender with such a look of murderous rage that she stepped back. Harry, hoping to avoid Ron killing Lavender, pulled him away.

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“Remember control,” Harry whispered very, very quietly to Ron. He appeared to be on the verge of jumping from his seat at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall and running to the girls’ loo.

“What do *you* know of it?” Ron snarled. Harry remained unperturbed and Ron’s face fell. “I’m sorry, mate. That was stupid. I’m just worried is all. What if we’re too late? What if the troll gets her, or another teacher, and what if she still doesn’t like us?”

Harry slowly sipped his water. Not because he didn’t want to answer Ron, but because Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan were sitting right across from them. They were laughing and generally carrying on and not one bit suspicious, but Harry was afraid. “It’ll be okay, Ron,” He murmured finally. “Hermione won’t get hurt. She won’t. And if she doesn’t start to like us... we’ll wear her down eventually.”

Ten minutes later, Professor Quirrell made his big entrance, shouted about the troll, and fainted. Harry and Ron were the first on their feet and heading toward the door by the time Dumbledore told everyone to follow the prefects back to their common rooms.

They didn’t quite make it to the door fast enough, and soon found themselves jostling for position amongst a sea of children. Harry plowed through, Ron at his side. They didn’t have much time to spare; by their reckoning they’d just barely made it the last time. Adrenaline pumped through Harry. He only had one thought as he pushed through the crowd: get to Hermione. Ron, a grim look of determination etched upon his face, was even more single-minded. They detached themselves as quickly and quietly as they could and immediately sprinted to Hermione and the troll.

They smelled it long before they saw it. They both paused.

“Always and always,” Harry said.

“Always and always,” Ron agreed. Together, they moved forward.

Both were capable of taking down a troll. A few Bludgeoning Hexes would do it; *Sectumsempra* certainly would, and there was no doubt that *Avada Kedavra* could do it as well. The only problem, as they saw it, was that they could not use any of the spells that would

effectively stop the troll in its tracks. Hermione would never, ever believe that first years could do it.

So they had to get by on dodging, jumping, and the few spells in the first year arsenal.

Approximately seven minutes and one stunned troll later, Harry and Ron stood triumphant next to the great, snoring, smelly head while Hermione trembled from underneath a partially demolished sink. Harry was actually surprised by this; they'd had to improvise quite a bit, and the bathroom was in greater disarray than it had been last time. He was relatively unhurt, although one of his fingers stung a bit. Ron was trying not to smirk at his own perfectly executed Wingardium Leviosa.

"Are you all right?" Ron asked Hermione.

"Yeah," Harry said, he stepped over the troll's head and hovered a few feet away from her. "Are you?"

"I-I-I think so," Hermione said shakily. "But what are you doing here?"

"We came to rescue you," Harry said simply. This was a mistake.

"And a very stupid idea that was, Potter!" He whirled around and saw Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick standing in the door. Her lips were pressed tightly together, and they were white around the edges. "You could have been *killed*! I can't believe the two of you would be so foolish."

"P-p-please, Professor," Hermione was sobbing. "They *rescued* me!"

"Be that as it may –"

Ron then did something both very brave and very foolish. He interrupted Professor McGonagall. "She could have been killed!"

Harry tried to mask his wince. "Professor," He said pleadingly, and then he lied, "We didn't know the troll would be here. We just wanted to warn her, and then we saw the troll coming in here..."

Professor McGonagall softened just a tiny bit. “Be that as it may, Mr. Potter, you ought to have warned a teacher.”

Harry saw Ron open his mouth, but kicked him before he could say anything. He wasn’t very gentle about it, either. “Professor, there just wasn’t time. It was mad, and there weren’t any teachers in sight.”

Snape appeared out of nowhere behind Professor McGonagall. He gave Harry a small nod; he’d made sure that Quirrell hadn’t taken advantage of the distraction to attempt to get to the Stone. Harry bowed his head.

“Five points from Gryffindor,” Professor McGonagall said tightly. “For Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter,” She sighed. “And ten points to Gryffindor for you both. It was a very foolish thing you did, but not many first years can take on a fully grown mountain troll and win.”

Hermione did not say anything at all as they marched back to their common room. She was still in shock, Harry supposed. They entered, and Harry laughed at the way Ron’s eyes lit up when he saw the mounds of food piled on top of the tables.

“Thanks,” Hermione finally said, not looking at either of them, and hurried off to get a plate.

Harry and Ron grinned at each other, before Ron, rubbing his stomach, moved to do likewise.

From that moment on, Hermione Granger was their friend again. It was good to know that facing down a mountain troll together was still something the three couldn’t experience without becoming friends.

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Winter came early. November storms rattled the castle, and by early December, Hogwarts was covered in a thick blanket of snow that probably would not melt until spring warmed the frigid air. The Gryffindor Quidditch team, disheartened by the recent loss, continued to practice but did so with little joy. Oliver Wood could be found most evenings sitting in front of the fire, gazing moodily. Harry could tell that he was reliving the last match – they’d been flattened by

Ravenclaw, to Professor Snape's delight. He'd managed to give them several more detentions, and could not seem to stop himself from gloating during their near-weekly meetings.

Harry lay in his bed one Sunday morning with his curtains drawn. Hedwig had arrived to wake Harry up with a special letter from Ginny concealed in one from Ron. This was only the third she'd been able to send, and Harry felt that Christmas had come a bit early.

Dear Ron, Ginny wrote.

There's been a change of plans! We aren't going to Romania this year – I accidentally destroyed the kitchen with magic (after she finished yelling at me, Mum said that she hadn't seen any accidental magic like it since the twins cut up Percy's pants, and he set their room on fire) so we have to stay behind to repair it and set up all the household spells. Mum says that she'll be too exhausted to go, and Dad agreed. So you're coming home for Christmas after all!

Mum decided that I must be lonely, so she said that she's going to have a witch my age come over a few times a week after the holidays. Her name is Luna Lovegood and she'll be at Hogwarts next year too. I don't think I've ever heard about the Lovegoods before, but Mum says they live near us, and that I must be sensitive because this Luna girl just lost her mother. I'm happy that I'll know someone at Hogwarts besides my annoying brothers.

Not much else is new; life at the Burrow is not quite as exciting as battling a mountain troll! You should've heard Mum. I'll bet she gives you a firm talking-to once you get home, so if I were you, I wouldn't be too excited. Dad's dead proud, though. I'm glad to hear that you are making new friends. This Hermione girl sounds very nice, even if she's got bad taste in friends.

See you at Christmas!

Love,

Ginny

Harry hurriedly read through the note, then tapped the parchment with his wand, muttering, "Always and always." The real letter appeared in short order.

My Harry,

It was very difficult to destroy the kitchen without it looking deliberate, let me tell you. And I feel horribly guilty about it, but I couldn't stand waiting all the way to summer without seeing you. It has already been too long. Did you know that this is the longest we've been parted since the Burrow was destroyed? I'm sure you do, but I think about it every day. Mum will forgive me once she realizes why I did it, although I'm vexed at her (and yet mindful that I have a mother to be vexed at again). I kept trying to ask her about Voldemort, but she keeps putting me off and telling me I'm too young. I know it's unfair of me – she couldn't possibly know that I'm really almost thirty years old, and as wonderful as it is to have my parents and my childhood home again, I can't help but feel impatient to get to Hogwarts and to help you and Ron. We'll think of a way to sneak off and you can tell me everything that Mum hasn't.

Mum finally took the bait and suggested that Luna would be a good playmate over the next few months. I can't wait to see her – I'll bet she's even crazier as a child! Make sure that Ron knows to be very careful with his words around her. Remember the keen mind obscured by the battiness. I'll bet you that if any of our friends figure it out before we tell them, it'll be Luna. Hermione's brilliant, but you know she'd never suspect something so ludicrous as time travel.

Speaking of Hermione, I'm so very glad that the three of you are friends once more. I knew the troll would do it, despite Ron's misgivings. Harry, I can guess what you see when you look at her, but try not to let the flames obscure the reality. She's here, she's alive, and so are we. She and Ron will get married and give us nieces and nephews to love.

I love you, Harry. I'll see you in two weeks (and we'll discuss a compromise on the four year thing).

Always and always,

Ginny

Harry smiled and folded the letter, placing it with the others she'd managed to send. It wasn't easy for her, he knew. She couldn't have any idea when he and Ron would send letters to her, and she'd find it hard to explain why she spent so much time thinking about a simple note to her brother. It was enough that she'd managed to steal one of her parents' wands several times to charm the parchment. He ached to see her, and it was like a knot in his belly.

He, Ron, and Hermione had been quite busy since Halloween and the return of their friendship. They'd spent time without her with Hagrid during the weeks that she'd ignored them. A few days after Halloween they'd told her everything they "knew" about the theft at Gringotts, the three-headed dog named Fluffy, and what they thought it was guarding. She was now in the thick of it right along with them.

"But who is Nicolas Flamel?" She'd asked, frustrated, yesterday morning at breakfast. "I know I've heard that name before! But he isn't in any of the books I've studied in the library."

Harry and Ron just shook their heads, pretending to be just as confused as she. "We'll keep looking, Hermione," Ron told her. "Meanwhile, we've got to find out who is trying to steal it."

This time around, they'd decided not to accuse Snape.

Things were moving just as slowly with Snape and Dumbledore. The tiara had been destroyed, at least, for which Harry was very grateful. Dumbledore had taken it outside Hogwarts grounds in early December and had performed several complex experiments upon it. He'd wanted to discover another, less dangerous way of destroying it besides resorting to Fiendfyre, and without having to be dependent upon the Sword of Gryffindor or the highly poisonous Basilisk fangs.

Nothing seemed to work, and finally (after telling Harry and Ron, who were 'serving another detention,' to stand well back) had destroyed the vile object with an awe-inspiring display of dragons and chimeras made of flame.

The Horcrux, now broken and free of the bit of soul Voldemort had placed in it, was placed in a shelf in Dumbledore's office.

So it was with good humor that Harry made his way down to the Great Hall several days before the Christmas holidays were set to begin. Ron had written his mum directly after receiving Ginny's note, and while an answer had not come back yet (he'd used Errol instead of Hedwig), both Harry and Ron were certain that the soft-hearted matriarch of the Weasley clan would not deny an orphan.

"HARRY!" Ron shouted. He was standing on his chair and beaming. Even Hermione, seated next to him, was smiling. "You're coming home with us for Christmas!"

Chapter 3 – Christmas Cheer

For the first time ever, Harry and Ron had packed the night before they left rather than putting it off until the next day. The long-standing tradition of running about madly and tossing whatever they could grasp into their over-flowing trunks had been abolished.

“Feels weird, doesn’t it?” Ron asked.

“What? Getting it done with more than five minutes to spare?”

Ron laughed. “That too. But I meant going *home*, to the *Burrow*! I barely saw it before Mum was screeching at me to get ready,” He smiled fondly, not at all upset about it. “I’d forgotten how loud she could get.”

They were in the Room of Requirement and had more time to speak to each other without Snape and Dumbledore wanting to discuss strategies and tactics, or Hermione wanting to discuss the Philosopher’s Stone. They didn’t begrudge either, but the two hours they had to completely relax stretched out before them like an early Christmas gift.

“Do you think it was stupid?” Harry asked suddenly. “To give that book to Hermione?” They’d ordered a very rare copy of *Memories Unbound* as a gift for their friend, and Harry had second-guessed the decision (even though he’d been the one to think of it) ever since.

“Nah, I’ve told you before,” Ron said lazily. “She’ll never believe it. You were right, mate, it sets the stage for when we tell her the truth. She’ll think it’s a load of rubbish.”

Harry nodded. “She’ll like the Chocolate Frogs, at least.”

“And not all of it was something she’d never believe,” said Ron. “Some of it wasn’t fairy-tale stuff. It had an entire chapter on Occlumency, even.”

Harry looked over at Ron. His already long legs stretched out toward the fire, and he had his arms behind his head. He looked completely

relaxed, but Harry knew his best mate well, and thus knew the tell-tale signs of anxiety: the occasional scratching of his long nose, the way he tapped his foot. Nothing too obvious, but Harry knew. He also knew what bothered him. Harry was not the only one who knew Ron that well, and they were going to be in the company of his family.

“Just stay relaxed,” Harry advised. “Ginny’s been able to do it all these months without any sort of problem.” At least she hadn’t mentioned it. It’d be just like Ginny to run into a spot of trouble the size of London and not see fit to tell them.

Ron snorted, “Like Ginny’d tell us.”

“If it was something major, I’m sure she would,” Harry murmured, despite the fact that he’d been thinking along the same lines as Ron. “I can’t wait to see her. She pointed out to me that we haven’t been apart for this long since the Burrow was destroyed.”

“You’ll see her in about ten hours,” Ron said absently. “We’ll have to find some way to get away from the Burrow, just the three of us. Hopefully tonight. And several more times over Christmas.”

“Isn’t this the most maddening thing?” Harry asked. “We’ve spent so many years alone, without anyone, and now we’re worried about getting away just the three of us?”

Ron laughed. “It’s up there with one of the best feelings in the world.”

“Ron,” Harry said seriously after a while. “You do think we’re doing the right thing with the Philosopher’s Stone? Letting it all play out the same way?”

Ron eyed him. “You’re having doubts?”

Harry was, but he had not told Ron of his misgivings. “I’m afraid,” He admitted. Then, when Ron looked shocked, he waved his hand abruptly. “Not of all the obstacles, dolt. I’m worried about Voldemort. What if he tries to use Legilimency on me?”

“Snape’s been training you in Occlumency again, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Harry admitted. “I’m a bit better, but not by much, and I’ve got to be perfect before I meet him. Imagine if he found out everything? I’ve got a lot of dangerous secrets, you know, and being from the future is just one of them. The Horcruxes, for one. He could easily hide them all again. We’ve got the tiara, and the locket is fairly safe at Grimmauld Place...”

“What about the cup?” Ron said shrewdly. “He can’t exactly go break into Gringotts again. At least, he can’t break into the Lestranges’ vault.”

“We did,” Harry pointed out quietly.

“We did because Hermione impersonated Bellatrix,” Ron replied. “Plus, I’ll bet he wouldn’t think of the dragon.”

“I’m still worried,” Harry said stubbornly. “It doesn’t matter about the diary Horcrux. Tom Riddle can find out all he wants before I kill him again. And even if he finds out when he resurrects himself would not be the end of the world. But we’ve only destroyed one Horcrux; and I don’t want to change everything too much. What if we can’t find out way to victory?”

“Keep up with the Occlumency,” was the only comfort Ron seemed able to give.

HPHPHPHPHPHP

The first month or so at Hogwarts had been very emotional for Harry. Seeing everyone alive and well again, untainted by the darkness that was to come, had brought a lump to his throat and tears to his eyes many a time during the first weeks. It had taken several weeks for him to adjust to this reality, one in which Harry was once again a first year. He rather thought that his former ten year old self would be completely incapable of experiencing this rather mixed bouquet of emotions: fear, joy, celebration, and guilt. But he had a better handle on it now; his body and mind had adjusted to the differences and the miracles.

Thus Harry was relieved to note that he was not in any danger of doing anything suspicious or embarrassing (such as bursting into tears) during the car ride home from the platform.

Arthur Weasley, tall, thin, and balding, picked them up in the old Ford Anglia. After a quick introduction to Harry, and a stern refusal to make use of the car's Invisibility Booster and powers of flight, he led them out to the car. The rowdy Weasley boys made short work of hefting their trunks into the magically enhanced boot, and piled into the backseat. Harry was not surprised to find that Percy claimed the front by right of the eldest son present.

London was sodden and gray, but the atmosphere in the car was lively and loud.

"—And then Penelope Clearwater, she's another prefect, you know, said" – Percy said from the front seat.

"But where does Lee expect we'll *find* it?"

"No idea, George, he's off his rocker if he thinks Mum'll let us go to Knockturn Alley."

"How was your term, boys?" Arthur said loudly after several minutes of this. Harry could see his eyes in the mirror, so he was certain the older man was talking to him and Ron.

"It was fun, Dad, I *love* Hogwarts!" Ron said enthusiastically.

"Even if it got to a bit of a rocky start?" Arthur's eyes twinkled. "Don't think your mother's forgotten about it, Ron. Speaking of the Confuzzle Draught," Arthur looked sternly at the twins. "Your mother suspects that you two were the ones to give it to them."

"We didn't!" George said immediately.

"Only because we didn't think of it," Fred said fairly. "It was pretty brilliant."

"I wish I could've been there," George added. "If only to see the expression on that old bat's face."

“George,” Arthur warned.

“Sorry,” George looked quite unabashed. “*Professor Old Bat.*”

Even Arthur laughed, and Percy cracked a grin, although Harry noticed that the older boy tried to hide it.

Harry decided to speak up. “Percy helped us with our potions work after that, since Professor Snape was so angry.”

“Yeah,” Ron put in. “If Percy hadn’t given us those tips about the common ingredients and whatnot, me and Harry would’ve lost even more points for Gryffindor.”

Percy sat up straighter. “Just doing my job, Ron. Prefects help the other students.”

“Don’t pretend that the fact that I’m your favorite brother had nothing to do with it,” Ron teased. Harry laughed.

It had been a plan of theirs to attempt to include Percy. When they’d first begun to scheme, Ron had been struck by an idea.

It was summer, and the residents of the cottage over-looking the river had changed almost completely in the last few months. Kreacher was simply delighted, and bustled around preparing meals that did not go completely unappreciated. Ron’s appetite especially had returned with a vengeance.

“Mmm,” He moaned, chewing a bite of sandwich. “The elf’s cooking gets better by the day. We ought to give him another Black family heirloom.”

Ginny looked exasperated but amused. “Ron, if you can stop thinking about food for just one second, we’ve got to talk about the family. Namely Percy.”

“What about Percy?” Ron asked. Apparently he’d not been listening to the other two for the last five minutes.

"We don't want him to support the Ministry again," Harry explained. "We know he'll come back in the end, but..."

"Well, I don't know how to do that, but we could just treat him better," Ron said after taking another bite. "We always treated him like the bastard of the family, except Mum and Dad. He was always pompous, yeah, but I regret a lot of the stuff we said over the years."

"Very insightful, Ron," Ginny smiled. "It may not make a difference, but..."

"At least he'll know we love him," Ron said. "Always and always."

Thus Harry and Ron had gone to Percy every once in a while throughout their first term at Hogwarts. Not with anything big or earth-shattering. But they asked him a question here and there, which Percy responded to with a surprising degree of warmth. Despite the prior knowledge of the subject, his answers about potions and transfiguration (neither of which Ron or Harry was particularly skilled at, then or now) were helpful.

Harry wondered about the changes they were making, and felt reasonably confident that they were for the better. Percy's loss had been devastating, most especially to Ron and Ginny. They'd been angry with him for years when he'd chosen to stand with the Ministry, even after Harry had been proven right. It was just barely after he had reunited with his family that Percy had been killed defending his mother from an attack from behind. Even if Percy chose to side with the Ministry again, Harry thought that he'd feel able to come back sooner.

"What has the two of you so quiet?" Fred asked suddenly. Startled, Harry looked out the window, and realized that dusk had fallen while he'd been lost in his thoughts.

Ron moaned. "Thinking about Mum, and all the words she'll have for me about the Confuzzle Draught and the troll."

George grinned evilly. "Better start getting your affairs in order."

"You're not like to live long once Mum gets her hands on you."

“Your mother is very proud of you, Ron,” Arthur interjected. “But she is a bit angry, yes.”

Percy swiveled around in his seat and grinned at Ron. “Better get started now, the Burrow’s only a kilometer away.”

Sure enough, they were driving past the small village of Ottery-St.-Catchpole, and Harry could see the orchard that marked the boundary of the land the Burrow sat upon and hid their small Quidditch pitch from view. It was a beautiful sight, Harry thought. The sun was setting behind the mountains, and made the snow that covered the ground and trees glow red, orange, and yellow. Soon enough, an even more beautiful sight came into view: the Burrow. It was just as crooked, ramshackle, and beloved as ever.

Harry got out of the car, retrieved his trunk, and gazed around. The old Wellington boots still guarded the backdoor, there was a clear path to the Quidditch pitch (Ginny obviously couldn’t stop herself from flying), and little tracks in the snow that belonged to the many garden gnomes that lurked around the Burrow because of Arthur’s kind heart.

“I expect Molly’s got dinner ready,” Arthur told his sons. “Be sure to take off your outer things in the hall – you know how your mother gets.”

“It’s just *snow*,” Fred and George complained in unison. “What’s a little bit of water?”

Arthur ignored them, but turned to smile kindly at Harry and squeezed Ron’s shoulder affectionately. “Welcome to the Burrow, Harry.”

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

They were lucky that Arthur Weasley had had the presence of mind to send his Patronus to his youngest son the night the Death Eaters attacked. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had been sitting in their tent, barely speaking. It had been a long year of hiding, and without any sort of sign of moving forward, they’d taken to snapping at each other. Not having any word from the outside world had not helped either.

"Honestly, Ron, you shouldn't just expect me to do all the cleaning," Hermione said irritably. She was polishing her wand for what seemed like the fifteenth time in as many days.

Ron was about to retort when they were astonished to see the unmistakable, misty form of Arthur's Patronus coalesce in front of him.

"Burrow under attack," it said, and vanished.

The three had never taken down the tent so quickly. It was packed within Hermione's beaded bag within a minute. They grasped hands and Disapparated.

For one moment, all Harry could do was look on in horror as what seemed like a dozen figures in black robes dueled with five red-heads... including two witches. Ginny. He ran, and started firing jinxes and hexes at any Death Eater he could, while careful not to hit any of the Weasleys. He took one down with Sectusempra – later, he recognized the man as Yaxley. He didn't get up again; Harry later thought that he might have been the first man he killed.

No time to worry, he charged forward. Ron was yelling, Hermione was shouting. The twins, grim-faced, dueled with two Death Eaters that Harry didn't recognize.

"Nice night for it!" George shouted as he hit his opponent with a particularly nasty jinx that caused black bile to come out of his eyes, ears, mouth and nose.

Harry shot a jinx at another man's back as he fought his way to Ginny's side. Her flaming hair swirled around her as she ducked, dodged, and dived, finally hitting her masked opponent with a powerful hex. He doubled over choking, while she looked for another fight. Her eyes fell on him.

"Harry!" She shouted. It was a mistake. Heads swiveled in his direction. Mrs. Weasley, taking advantage of the inattention, Stunned the hooded figure near her. Mr. Weasley was thrown into a wall, and lay unmoving, by a hard-faced man with thin black hair and an ugly smile.

“Well, well,” said Bellatrix Lestrange from behind him. “Little baby Potter came to save his fake family, did he? The Dark Lord always knows!”

Harry Stunned her. It caught her by surprise, he noted coldly. She liked to toy with her victims, and they usually let her. Harry refused to let her distract him. He took a moment to bind her with ropes he conjured, and turned to fight again.

He and Ginny stood back to back and dueled their hardest; they managed to avoid most of the curses. Until the dark-haired man stepped up.

Harry could see him out of the corner of his eye; he was looking at Ginny in such a way that made his blood boil with rage. His own opponent was weakening, but he wasn’t finished yet.

“Crucio!” The man yelled, and Harry was an instant too slow. Agony sliced through him, and he fell to the ground, writhing in pain. He heard someone screaming, and knew it was himself. It seemed to last forever, but it stopped after long moments. He stood sluggishly on his feet and made little whimpering sounds that humiliated him even then.

The dark-haired man was closing in on Ginny. She was getting tired, he realized in an instant. Her wand arm was not moving with the same rapid grace he’d become accustomed too. Turning, he sent another Sectumsempra at the dark-haired Death Eater and saw a great gash slice open his chest before he felt the agony of the Cruciatus Curse once more.

It lasted less than a minute this time, before Harry cracked open his eyes and saw one of the twins tear him apart.

He stood, shakily, to his feet. It was a brief lull in the battle, Mrs. Weasley was helping Mr. Weasley to his feet while Ron and Hermione took down Selwyn.

Bellatrix threw off her bonds and raised her wand, pointing it at the back of Fred. He saw her lips move, and knew it was a Killing Curse. “Protego!” Harry shouted, and a shimmering shield erupted between her and Fred. She cursed, and shouted another word that caused

great, living flames to erupt all around. They took the form of great dragons, serpents, and other creatures like a macabre, fiery menagerie.

“GET OUT!” Harry bellowed. “TO GRIMMAULD PLACE! GO!” Ron rushed forward and grabbed his father’s shoulder and his mother’s hand and disappeared. Hermione whirled in one spot, the twins gripped each other’s forearms and they too left. Harry felt blindly – his glasses were hanging off one ear – for Ginny’s hand. He finally found it, righted his glasses, and thought with all his might of the front step of his dead godfather’s house: the very last place he wanted to be, and the only place that seemed relatively safe.

The Burrow erupted in flames, and he felt a stab of grief in his heart for the place he’d had the closest thing he’d had to a childhood.

“Oi! Wake up!” Ron’s voice interrupted the dream of the Burrow burning, for which Harry was grateful. “What were you dreaming of?”

“The Burrow,” Harry muttered, reaching for his glasses.

“Not surprised,” Ron said after a moment. “I can’t get it out of my mind either.”

It was the third day of the holiday, and Harry found himself both frustrated and elated by turns. It was just as wonderful as he remembered, this place and these people. Mrs. Weasley had been kind and loving – after she’d scolded them both for the troll. She’d been mollified when they explained that they only went to find Hermione. There was never a dull moment with any of Ron’s siblings. They were loud and merry, especially around this time of year.

Harry could hardly stop himself from staring at Ginny. It reminded him a bit of the time he’d spent at the Burrow during the summer between his first and second year. Only this time, they both blushed – something that Harry fervently hoped the twins did not notice. It wasn’t out of shyness, though, but out of strong feelings that could not be expressed any other way.

“Listen,” Ron broke into his reverie. “I’ve got an idea for getting away with Ginny. You’ve got your Cloak, right?” Harry held it up silently. “Surprised I didn’t think of this before.”

HPHPHPHPHPHP

Despite his fitful rest, Harry found himself wide awake as he and Ron, under the Invisibility Cloak, tip-toed to Ginny’s room and opened the door without making a sound. Ron’s brilliant plan had included nothing more than the Invisibility Cloak and the surety that everyone else was sleeping. It was past midnight, and the small room was lit only with the light of the moon. A small figure huddled under the blankets. Harry walked tentatively over to the sleeping Ginny. He gazed down at her for a moment, drinking in the sight of her.

Ron nudged him.

He bent over and whispered, “Ginny. Wake up.” Behind him, he heard Ron mutter, “*Muffliato*.”

She murmured and sighed a little, but didn’t awaken. Harry brushed her hair away from her face and pressed a small kiss on her lips. Her eyes flew open. “Harry...” She yawned and grinned at him. For a moment he couldn’t say anything, but smiled back rather stupidly.

“We did it,” she whispered. “We did!”

They all grinned at each other, and Harry felt almost ridiculously happy. Harry sat down next to her, and she scooted over, making room. He took her hand and gripped it tight.

“So,” She said. “Tell me everything!”

And they did. It didn’t take very long. They lingered over the particularly humorous moments with Snape while she laughed delightedly. And she was in stitches while they described the fight with the troll, which had been made more difficult than they’d remembered since they had few usable spells in their arsenal.

“Oh, but I’m glad Hermione’s all right!” Ginny stopped laughing after a moment. “But tell me about that prophecy! I’ve been perishing of curiosity for ages.”

They told her, and her face fell. “I thought it might be something like that. I finally dragged the truth out of Mum when Ron asked if Harry could stay,” for some reason she looked uncomfortable and a little worried. “Mum... she wasn’t sure if Harry should.”

“What?” Ron said loudly. “Since when...?”

“Well...” Ginny said slowly. “The only bit that anyone knows about – although everyone seems to know that there is more to it than that – talks about the terrible power. That wasn’t in the old version, and I have to wonder what it means. Keep in mind... Harry, no one thinks that Voldemort is going to come back. Mum and Dad talk about him as if he’s dead forever. What people are worried about is the fact that you apparently have this terrible power, it ‘killed’ Voldemort, and now they’re a little frightened of you. Mum said that about five years ago there was an article in the Daily Prophet that questioned whether or not you’d be a good wizard or an evil one.”

The words took awhile for Harry to process. It had seemed funny in Dumbledore’s office on their first day of classes that anyone would think that he’d be evil. It was not funny anymore at all. If Mrs. Weasley had not wanted him...

“What does Mum think?” Ron asked quietly. He had sat down at Ginny’s feet while she’d talked. “And why didn’t she want Harry around?”

“Well...” Ginny paused. “You know how she is. You mustn’t think that she blamed Harry for what happened your first day. She blamed you just as much, Ron.”

“I *did* steal the Dungbombs,” Ron said modestly.

Ginny giggled. “True. She had to have known that a child with no Wizarding background – don’t look at me like that, Harry, she thinks all you’ve known since you were one are the Dursleys – could pull that. And she came around when she heard about the Confuzzle

Draught... but I reckon she thought that you wouldn't have spoken up if you hadn't been with Harry."

"Which is true," Harry added fairly.

"Indeed," Ginny agreed. "But with the article and the weeks and weeks of detention and the troll... She's wondering, that's all."

Harry sat in thought, rubbing the pad of his thumb on Ginny's palm. He remembered with perfect clarity the warmth that Mrs. Weasley had always felt for him. She'd loved him since practically the first meeting, even though he seemed to lead her children into danger quite a bit. The Ministry battle, for instance, when Sirius had died. She'd never by word or deed told him (or any of her children, he thought) that she blamed him for these dangerous situations he seemed to find himself in. He'd wondered, during his two weeks of depression after that particular battle and before Dumbledore came to collect him, if Mrs. Weasley would be angry with him for taking Ginny and Ron along. When he'd shown up at the Burrow, though, those doubts had vanished.

"Listen," he said. "I reckon that your mum thinks that I'm a bit dangerous to have as a friend."

"Harry..."

But Harry stopped Ginny. "She's right. You know she is. I'm not saying that – for the most part the – I don't think I've played casually with your lives. At least I've never meant to."

"We know," Ron rolled his eyes.

"Don't," Harry said. "This is serious. I'm not going off on one of my guilt induced pleadings for you guys to stay away from me. I'd like to think that I'm beyond that... kind of. Not that I want you to stay away from me, but remembering what we lost..."

"We feel the same way, Harry," Ginny squeezed his hand. "As I recall, none of us trusted Snape, and we all knew that Dumbledore trusted him beyond reason. It was a mistake we all made together."

“Yeah,” Harry sighed.

“But not this time,” Ron told him. “We know what’s going on.”

“Except for this ‘terrible power’ I’m supposed to have,” Harry said. “I don’t get why that changed. I know that my greatest weapon is love. And I know that’s what defeated him the first time. But what if, this time, it’s different?”

They sat in silence for a time, thinking and trying to come up with an easy solution that would explain the ramifications of the different prophecy. It was a comfortable silence, for the most part. The fact that Mrs. Weasley did not immediately trust Harry was not something that concerned Ron and Ginny too much. And Harry hoped, by the time the truth was out, that any mistrust would be obliterated. But it made him slightly wary, and slightly less secure.

“I worry about when it comes out that I’m a Parselmouth,” Harry said finally. “If people are so worried about that prophecy, and unsure of my motives, won’t it deepen the misgivings?”

Ginny looked thoughtful. “As I recall, it couldn’t be any worse. And I’m thinking it’ll be better, since Dumbledore knows everything.”

“And Harry’ll take care of everything with the Basilisk in the end,” Ron interjected. “That’ll count for something.”

“I do wonder who wrote that article,” Ginny admitted. “It seemed like one of Rita Skeeter’s pieces, but it was apparently anonymous. I can’t see her writing something that inflammatory without having her byline on it. I wonder if it was a Death Eater, actually.”

“That would make sense. Even if some of them don’t know exactly what steps Voldemort took to insure his continued existence, I’ll bet they’d leap at a chance to discredit me,” Harry agreed. “Lucius Malfoy, for one.”

Ron sighed. “I’ll be glad when we tell Hermione, that’s for sure. I’ll bet she’ll tell us right off where we’re wrong and such.”

“Speaking of Hermione...” Ginny began slyly, and Ron flushed.

“Quiet, you,” he said.

Ginny opened her eyes wide innocently, but neither one of them were fooled. She was bent on tormenting her brother for a bit, Harry realized. “I just hope that you’re being *nice* to her now.”

Ron grinned, though his ears were still red. “I am.”

“They still argue,” Harry felt compelled to say. “But it isn’t mean.”

“I can’t imagine Ron and Hermione without the arguing,” Ginny said ruefully. “It’s like foreplay for them.”

Ron chose that moment to leave. “I’m going to bed,” he announced, standing up and striding to the door. He stood with his hand on the knob and looked back at them. “Don’t stay up too late, children,” he said gleefully.

“I’ll be up in a few minutes,” Harry promised, though he didn’t want to. He was exhausted, and he knew that if he stayed too long and fell asleep it would be disastrous. He was grateful for the time alone with Ginny, and as soon as Ron shut the door behind him, he leaned over and gave her a soft kiss.

She sighed. “Hard to believe that we’ll have nothing more than kisses for the next few years.”

“Don’t argue,” Harry said sternly. “You’re lucky it isn’t longer.”

She nestled up against him. “I know. This body,” she looked down on herself dubiously. “It’s hard to reconcile a grown woman’s desire with a body that hasn’t gone through puberty. Don’t get me wrong, Harry, the desire hasn’t gone away...”

“I know,” Harry kissed her hair. It still smelled like flowers. “I do know. I’m relieved that I have no desire to do anything besides a few kisses. I’d be rather worried if I did. But when I look at you, I can see the woman that you’ll become. *That’s* what makes me want the years go by fast.”

"I know," Ginny grinned impishly at him. "I'm glad I talked you down to fourteen."

"That's still young," Harry pointed out.

"But only in body, Harry, like I told you. Sometimes I think that the dangers of sex at the age of fourteen are mental and emotional, rather than physical. Plenty of women throughout the ages have been married by the time they have their first cycle."

"I know," Harry said. "Fourteen is soon enough, I think. Your body will be physically mature, and we don't have to worry about the mental and emotional aspect of it. I love you, Ginny."

"Always and always, Harry," she sighed. Harry knew that she was fading fast, and that she needed her sleep. But he continued to stroke her hair. Intimacy did not have to be about sex, as far as he was concerned. It was about the love he felt for this woman that he had never felt for anyone else, and it translated over to everything he did. They had saved each other from the agony of the first years, and the desperation of the last four. He'd love her forever. This quiet moment was no less full of love.

He finally left, leaving Ginny peacefully sleeping. She'd fallen asleep in his arms as she had so many times before. He smiled, and left.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

"Harry!" Ron yelled. "Wake up! It's Christmas!"

Harry jumped out of bed, not even fully awake. He grabbed for his wand, realized where he was, and lay back down with a groan. "*Must* you, Ron?"

He saw a blurry figure of a red-headed boy, grinning from ear to ear. "Get up, Harry, I'll bet the others are waiting for us. We've got to keep up appearances."

Appearances, my arse, Harry thought. Unbelievably, Ron was *still* thrilled by Christmas morning, even though he knew exactly what each of the presents held. Come to think of it, though, Harry found a

well of excitement inside himself. It spurred him on to pull robes over his underpants, and he was not far behind Ron when he thundered down the stairs.

The tree was just as lavishly decorated as all the other times at the Burrow. Harry gazed suspiciously at the tree-topper. Unable to discern whether or not it was a gnome, he turned toward the modest pile of presents that had his name on it. Only he and Percy were slow about opening their presents. Ron, the twins, and Ginny were ripping packages apart with their enthusiasm. Wrapping paper flew everywhere while Mr. and Mrs. Weasley looked on with fond despair.

"Mmm," Ron said. "Chocolate frogs from Hermione!" He held them up in victory, while Harry laughed.

"I've got the same from her," Harry said. "I'll be able to build my collection!"

"I'll give you any of my repeats," Ron assured him. "My collection's almost complete, but I always get loads of extras. I think I've got about ten of Dumbledore, he's the most common."

"Thanks, Ron," Harry beamed at him.

The day was spent with such a level of frivolity and fun that Harry almost felt light-headed. After everyone had finished opening their gifts, they immediately put on their Weasley sweaters. All except Harry; he hadn't received one this year, but the wariness and unease Harry had felt when they'd spoken in Ginny's room were muted. Harry could wait for Mr. and Mrs. Weasley to trust him. Besides, Mrs. Weasley simply might not have had time to make him a sweater. Then, after a large, delicious breakfast that lasted almost two hours, they all marched outside to have a serious snowball battle. When they came back in, flushed from the cold and arguing heartily about who won, mugs of steaming hot chocolate awaited them.

"This is delicious, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said enthusiastically. "Thank you for having me."

If he hadn't been watching her so closely, he would have missed the doubt that flickered across her plump, kind face. "You're welcome, Harry."

I can't expect her to immediately trust me, Harry thought later, lying awake in bed with only Ron's loud snores for company. *It isn't fair.* But when he remembered the words she'd spoken to him the night they found out that Remus and Dora Lupin had been found dead alongside their small son Teddy.

Harry sat in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place with grief weighing heavy on his heart. He was alone in the darkened room. Ron and Hermione had disappeared hours ago, and he suspected that Hermione had cried herself to sleep and Ron had been there to comfort her. Ginny also was sleeping in the next room. She'd sat with him and held his hand for hours without saying a word, but exhaustion had eventually overcome her, and Harry had quietly withdrawn.

"Harry," Mrs. Weasley said softly. She said, "Lumos," and her wand flickered and caused the room to brighten by a degree.

He turned to look at her, and could no longer keep the tears at bay. She enfolded him into a warm embrace and held him while he cried, heart-broken.

"We'll get through this," she murmured.

But Harry had a hard time believing it. Remus Lupin, the last true Marauder, was gone, and with him, the last link to the father he'd never known. And Dora's life snuffed out too, charming, clumsy Dora with a smile that could cheer up almost anyone. Small Teddy, not even two years old, killed before he could really live, Harry's godson.

"Mrs. Weasley," Harry said finally. He withdrew, and she sat in the chair beside him. "Do you really think I can do this?"

"I know you will," she answered immediately. "I've watched you grow up, Harry. I know you. If anyone can do it, you can. And you won't stop until you've defeated You-Know-Who."

“Are you sure?” Harry felt a little humiliated when his voice came out very small. He almost sounded like a child, not almost twenty years old.

“I have faith in it,” she said. “So does the rest of the family, and anyone who knows you. You’ll defeat him. Unless I miss my guess, you’re the only one who can. Not,” she said ruefully and waved the hand not holding the lit wand, “that I know the full contents of the prophecy. But you’re a truly remarkable wizard, Harry. And I think I’ve known, on some level, that you’d be the one to defeat You-Know-Who. I think I’ve known since you rescued Ginny from the Chamber, and maybe even before that. Maybe I’ve known it since I received a certain letter from Hogwarts saying that you and my son rescued a girl you barely tolerated from a troll. You’re our best hope. It must be such a burden, but I know you’re up to the task. There’s never been any question at all, in my mind...”

But now she was questioning, Harry knew it. He didn’t know how to prove to her that he was as far from being another Dark Lord as was possible. They couldn’t tell her the secret; Dumbledore’s portrait had expressly warned him not to tell anyone besides himself and Professor Snape for as long as he could. Harry had made the mistake of not trusting him before, and he would not do it again.

He eased into anxious dreams in which people were talking about him in mutters behind closed doors, and he wandered through a huge house, and he could hear the people he loved, but whenever he turned to look for them they weren’t there. He cried like a baby, and eventually he looked down at himself and realized that he was a baby, and he was all alone and bundled snugly in knitted blanket decorated with a W. But then Professor McGonagall came and told him that he couldn’t have the blanket; she took it away, and he was left alone and naked, crying on the floor.

He awoke to the familiar feeling of his scar prickling.

Chapter 4 – The Ripple Effect

January was well underway by the time Harry had a chance to speak with Dumbledore alone. Ron, infuriatingly, did not share any of Harry's misgivings, and did not give it as much thought as Harry would have liked.

"Relax, Harry! You worry too much," Ron had said one night when they'd had a chance to meet in the Room of Requirement. Harry was reminded forcibly of the several instances throughout the years when Ron had blithely ignored what he called Harry's obsessions.

"And you don't worry enough," Harry'd replied darkly.

Ron spent much of his time goading Hermione into small arguments with such relish that she could not take offense. Already she seemed to be fonder of Ron than of Harry, and he had little doubt that her feelings would deepen when she was ready for it. It warmed his heart.

Thus Harry was left to take his concerns to Dumbledore alone, and it took no small effort to find a way to do so without arousing suspicion. He thought of repeating his actions on the first day, or doing something similar, but that could lead to trouble. He also thought of asking Professor Snape to help, but he needed to speak to Dumbledore alone, and he was not sure if Snape would understand. True, they were on much better terms than they were before, but Snape was still very prickly and Harry knew that he still resented the fact that Harry was the offspring of James and Lily.

He finally resolved to send Dumbledore a message with his Patronus, and hope that Dumbledore was not in a public place. If Aberforth heard, it wouldn't be so bad. Aberforth Dumbledore was about as tight-lipped as they came. But if Dumbledore was enjoying a drink at the Three Broomsticks, the Leaky Cauldron, or even having a conference with a teacher... It would be difficult to explain why a Patronus spoke with a child's voice.

I have got to stop doing this, Harry thought, frustrated. The constant second-guessing was taking its toll. *I can't possibly live like this.*

With that in mind, he lifted his wand to his lips, murmured, "*Expecto Patronum*." The bright stag shone clearly in the Room of Requirement which he currently occupied alone. Ron had long since gone to bed. Harry stared at it for a moment, thinking of his father. He wondered what James and Lily would say if they were alive; would they understand his need to save the Weasleys and his friends? Or would they be angry that he had not tried to save them too?

"Tell Albus Dumbledore this: 'In the Come and Go Room. Need to talk. Please,'" He told the stag firmly. It turned and leapt into nothing, leaving behind a misty vapor.

Harry did not have long to wait. After several moments, he stood and cracked open the door of the Room of Requirement, both to let Dumbledore in, and to give himself something to do. While he did so, he noticed the Room had provided another large armchair and a crackling fire in a tall hearth.

Five minutes later, he heard swift-moving footsteps echoing along the corridor. Dumbledore was still wearing the same robes as he had that day, and he appeared alert, but not reproving.

"I'm sorry, Professor," Harry said. "I hope I didn't take you from something important."

"Quite all right, Harry," Dumbledore replied. He gazed around the room with an expression of open delight. "I do wish I'd known of this room earlier, I must say." He seated himself on one of the chairs, and looked at Harry expectantly. "To what do I owe this very late pleasure?"

"I have some questions for you," Harry sat down, and looked at the fire. After a moment, he turned to meet the other wizard's gaze. "About the prophecy, and the differences in the timeline."

"Ah, I see that we have been thinking along the same lines," Dumbledore nodded. "Have you had any luck in figuring out what the 'terrible' power you have is?"

"No," Harry answered. "Not really. Professor... how did the prophecy become common knowledge? Did you and Professor Snape tell others?"

"Absolutely not," Dumbledore said. "The moment I heard it, I knew that it must be kept secret. For Voldemort to find out... That would have been terrible." He looked troubled. "We can only be thankful that the fullness of it was not leaked."

Harry emphatically agreed. "So... how did it happen? In the other time, Snape heard the first part of the prophecy, and he's the one who told Voldemort about it. Who was it this time?"

Dumbledore looked startled. "It was Severus. That's the same. He did not turn against Voldemort until he started hunting down you and your mother and father."

Harry nodded. So the Dumbledore in this time had trusted Snape with the full prophecy. No matter. It was a very small difference in the grand scheme of things, and Snape was a trusted ally. "So who else knew enough of it that they could spread it throughout the Wizarding world?"

"That, Harry, is a decade old mystery," Dumbledore sighed. "We suspect that it was one of the Death Eaters. Severus claimed that he had never spoken to anyone in Voldemort's inner circle about the prophecy, but that does not mean that Voldemort did not confide in one of them. Bellatrix Lestrange and her husband seem likely candidates, and I would not be surprised if it was Lucius Malfoy. It also could have been Peter Pettigrew; we can ask him when the time comes. He could have heard it from your parents or from Voldemort. Until a few months ago, I must admit that Sirius Black was suspect."

"My parents knew about the prophecy?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Yes, I explained to both them and the Longbottoms that a prophecy had been made concerning one of their sons and Voldemort," Dumbledore answered. "I couldn't ask them to go into hiding without offering a reason to do so."

That made sense. It didn't really change anything, but Harry had to wonder what his parents had thought when they'd realized that their son was destined to either kill Voldemort or be killed himself.

"Listen," Harry said. "We'll ask Wormtail when we 'discover' his true identity. But that doesn't concern me that much at the moment. I want to know about that article in the *Daily Prophet* concerning me and my loyalties." And then he told him everything that had occurred at the Burrow, and all of his concerns, including the fact that it was of no concern to Ron at all. It was a relief that Dumbledore did not dismiss his concerns as Ron had, but instead remained silent for long moments. He appeared to be marshalling his thoughts.

"I can see your point," Dumbledore finally said. "I can also see Mr. Weasley's. No," He held up his hand when Harry opened his mouth to argue. "Do not get me wrong, I find it disturbing. But I also agree that you will prove time and time again where your loyalties lie. I believe the first time will be only months from now. I think that will dispel suspicion a great deal. Not to mention that I – forgive me my lack of modesty – have a great many friends in the Wizarding world. I will do all in my power to counter the suspicion."

Harry grinned at him. He felt as though a huge weight that had rested on his shoulders had been lightened. The worry was still there, but by its decrease, Harry realized just how worried he had been. Then his brows furrowed. "About that article..."

"Yes, the infamous article," Dumbledore said ruefully. "Forgive me for allowing a seed of doubt."

"Don't worry about it," Harry assured him. "You couldn't have known," he paused. "Do you think it might've been written by the same Death Eater – or whoever – as leaked the prophecy?"

"The thing is, Harry," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "I do not believe that the person who wrote the article was a Death Eater. You must remember that I taught all of them in their youth. I know them, and I know how their minds work. Unless it was a foreign Death Eater – and I'm almost positive that it wasn't – or a Death Eater previously unknown to me, I'm almost certain that none of them wrote that article."

It was not an accusation, exactly. It felt more like a warning, and a well-reasoned one at that.”

Harry could not help but feel a little confused. “If it wasn’t a Death Eater, then who would write it? Rita Skeeter?”

“No. Whoever wrote the article did it completely objectively,” Dumbledore said slowly. “It even swayed me a little, as I have already told you. It did not attempt to stir fear, I do not believe, although many people were afraid before the initial furor died down. It was written logically. It discussed the history of prophecies, and it offered several speculations as to the nature of this specific one. It pointed out the flaws of them, and how they do not generally come to pass in an expected manner. I would not be surprised to find that the author was an Unspeakable with advanced knowledge of the subject. It offered several different speculations as to your nature, the nature of the prophecy, and concluded that the Wizarding world could not immediately think of you as a savior.”

Harry grew warier and warier. “Did it mention anything about the last bit? The part that you and Snape have kept to yourself?”

“No,” Dumbledore answered. “I still have the article; I’ve saved it, as I daresay many have. I’ll be sure to pass it along to you in the near future. After you have read it, possibly you can offer insight with your prior knowledge.”

Harry was doubtful. This was something completely new to him. He tapped his fingers against the arm of the chair, and stared in the general direction of the wall. “Why do you suppose this changed so much?”

“As to that, I can only offer a guess.”

Harry snorted. “Your guesses generally turn out to be true,” he said fondly.

Dumbledore chuckled, and his eyes twinkled madly behind his glasses. “I suspect that your arrival – yours and Mr. Weasley’s and Mrs. Potter’s – caused a ripple effect. If you drop a stone into a pond, the ripple does not move straight out. It causes circles that move in all

directions. You've already changed the future by being here; I am not surprised that the past was also affected."

"Let's just hope that the future is changed far more than the past," Harry said pointedly. "I don't think I could survive another devastation."

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The month was almost over when Errol brought the morning mail. He flew, lopsided, through the air, clipped a few students' heads with his wings, tumbled over, righted himself, and landed on Ron's plate of fried eggs and sausages with a wheeze and a faint hoot. Ron, covered in egg, sputtered indignantly, while several of the other Gryffindors looked on and laughed.

"That owl doesn't look like he'd survive another trip," Hermione said thoughtfully. Harry sprinkled some water over Errol's beak, hoping it would help revive him.

"Yeah, because I'm going to kill him," Ron said darkly.

"Get your letter and give him here, Ron," Percy was beside them. "I'll take him to Hagrid."

Ron pulled the letter off the nearly unconscious owl's leg. Percy gently lifted Errol and left. He opened it. "It's from my sister," he said. "She'd better have a good reason for nearly killing Errol."

Dear Ron,

I'm glad you got back to school okay. Thanks for telling me all about Hogwarts. Fred and George always talked about it like it was a mixture of a dungeon where professors routinely inflicted torture on students, and a Muggle amusement park. I'm glad to know that it's neither. Six more months and I'll know for myself! I'm counting the days, and I'm marking my calendar.

I met Luna Lovegood today. She's very strange (Mum thinks it's because Zella Lovegood died just last year), but in a good way. She was very quiet at first, but once our lessons were through (Mum is

teaching us some basics, although she won't allow us to use a wand), we had a nice long talk. I'm sure we'll be good friends.

Speaking of friends, has Harry recovered from Christmas? He seemed a bit nervous. Don't tell him I asked, of course.

Love,

Ginny

It was quite unlike her previous letters. It was scattered and if there were hidden meanings behind the words, Harry could not figure them out. Either she was being too subtle, or this was only a chat-filled note to her brother. His brows furrowed.

"Maybe you shouldn't read other people's letters if you aren't going to like what they say," Hermione said waspishly, looking at Harry. She was on the other side of Ron, and she had obviously read it too. "And Ron, you shouldn't let Harry read it if your sister doesn't want you to. Does she have a bit of a crush on Harry?"

"Yeah," Ron said at once. "She's been talking about him for years."

Harry could tell that Ron was a little worried as well, although they could not possibly break away from Hermione until after Herbology. They finally muttered an excuse about having to go to the loo, and found a secluded area away from prying eyes.

"Always and always," Ron tapped the parchment, and found a long letter that contained surprising news.

Boys,

Luna knows! I have no idea how, and I was completely shocked. Mum had us learning basic magical theory about wands and such, and Luna was very, very quiet. She didn't say anything about Nargles or Wrackspurts or Crumple-Horned Snorkacks, but she stared at me a lot. You know that look she gets, when her eyes are even wider than normal. After the lesson, I offered to show her our Quidditch pitch, and she didn't say a word at all while I babbled. Then she asked me how old I was. When I said ten, she tilted her head, and

said "How old are you really?" I nearly fell over. Then she told me her dad had told her all about time-travelers, and that she knew perfectly well that I was not ten years old. I couldn't think of a way to get out of it; you know how laughing it off never works with her. So I told her the truth. Not all of it, but I had to tell her about the two of you, and how we lost nearly everyone, so we had to come back and do it all over again. I didn't tell her anything about the prophecy, or the Horcruxes.

I must admit that I'm still in a state of shock. She swore – and I trust her – that she wouldn't tell anyone, not even her dad. Is it bad that I'm happy that she knows? It's very lonely without the two of you to keep me company, and I know we agreed not to tell anyone until the time is right, but it makes me happy that I have someone to confide in. Just as I'm sure you both would be relieved if Hermione found out on her own (although I doubt our sensible friend will). Don't pretend that you didn't give her that book just to set the stage. I'll bet you two – and especially you, Ron – wished she'd sent a letter on Christmas telling you she'd figured out everything.

She also said that there's a precedent for time travel in some of the older Wizarding fairy tales, the ones even before Beedle the Bard. She said that her dad and mum used to read her the old Arthurian legends. Supposedly the Tears of Merlin actually came from Merlin himself. Given the sad way Camelot fell, I hope we have more success. I know we'll have more success. She was surprisingly rational about it, until she asked if I was Guinevere. When I said absolutely not, she actually told me that it was an easy mistake to make. How is it easy for someone to mistake me for some long dead queen? There's my name, and that's about it.

She asked me how she died (another shock). She seemed to understand when I wouldn't tell her – I don't think I can. I don't even like to think about what happened to her...

Harry, don't brood over this. We always thought that Luna would be the one to guess our secret. I just didn't think that it would happen so soon!

Always and always,

Ginny

Harry and Ron stared at each other in stunned silence. How could she possibly have known?

"You owe me ten galleons," Ron informed him.

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Hermione threw herself down on the floor of the common room with a loud groan. "My head hurts," she moaned.

"You read too much," Ron told her. She tilted her head and smiled up at him.

"It's your own fault," she replied.

"That you read too much? Doubt it. When do you ever see me with a book in my hand that isn't a textbook?" Ron argued.

"Well, that book you gave me was really interesting," she said. "So I've been doing further research just for fun."

Harry sat up straight, and exchanged a glance with Ron. This was the first time (beyond thanking them) that she had mentioned *Memories Unbound*. It had been a month since Ginny's letter about Luna, and Harry could not help but feel a little hope that Hermione had figured it out. Perhaps the research was in different methods of time travel, and she was about to confront them with her knowledge.

"What?" Hermione looked from one to the other.

"Just the fact that you call research fun," Ron grinned at her. "Give us poor blokes a break. We haven't got your brains."

"You could if you *tried*, Ron. You're a very talented wizard," Hermione argued. "If you paid more attention in class instead of playing hangman with Harry..."

"Not likely," Ron shrugged. "What's given you a headache?"

"Well, I've been researching the triumvirate of mind magic – you know, Occlumency, Legilimency, and Obfuscomency," Hermione explained.

“I’ve been trying to do a bit of Occlumency, but it’s given me a headache.”

“Obfuscomency?” Harry asked blankly.

“It’s a mixture between Occlumency and Legilimency. Occlumency is —“

But Ron interrupted her. “We know what Occlumency and Legilimency are – we, er, flipped through the book before we gave it to you.”

“How? You ordered it from Flourish and Blotts,” Hermione said shrewdly. “I saw the owl.”

“How do you think we knew what to get?” Harry asked quickly. *Damn.* Hermione was too smart for her own good. “We went to Diagon Alley right after we got to the Burrow for some last minute Christmas shopping Ron’s mum had to do.”

“Yeah, and we knew you’d like a book,” Ron told her. “So we tried to find an interesting one.”

“So what’s Obfuscomency?” Harry asked, hoping that she wouldn’t know that that they’d ordered it back in early November. It was just lucky that they had, in fact, gone to Diagon Alley, so if she asked one of the older Weasley boys their story wouldn’t completely fall apart.

“Well, the bit about Obfuscomency is a bit confusing. But from what I can work out, it’s sort of a mixture of Occlumency and Legilimency. No, that isn’t quite right. While Legilimency is offensive and Occlumency is defensive, Obfuscomency is both.”

Harry wondered if he’d have better luck with Obfuscomency, and resolved to speak to Professor Snape the next time he went for his weekly torture. Occlumency continued to elude him, just as it had in the past. This time, he was actually trying, and despite his desire to erect a wall in his head that would keep Voldemort from discovering his secrets, it was not going well. He’d managed a thin shield last time, but Snape had battered through it within thirty seconds.

“How so?” Harry asked.

“Unlike Occlumency, it does not attempt to keep out a Legilimens,” Hermione explained. “It’s more like it traps them in specific memories. Although that’s a horrid explanation. Let’s say... if someone has something to hide, they can effectively use some of their own memories as a shield. It isn’t perfect, of course, but the benefit is that the Legilimens won’t even know.”

Leave it to Hermione, Harry thought. *She’s only twelve years old, and she’s still smarter than us.* He grinned.

“My dad reckons that You-Know-Who is a Legilimens,” Ron told her. “That’s why we’re so interested. I reckon I might learn this Occlumency.”

Hermione looked horrified at the thought of Voldemort being able to read minds. “That’s what I’ve been doing, that’s why I’ve got such a headache,” she bit her lip, and said so quietly that Harry had to lean forward to listen, “do you really think that he’s going to come back? You-Know-Who?”

“Yes,” Harry said gently. “The first time I met him, Hagrid said that he didn’t think Voldemort was really gone,” he ignored her flinch. “He said that Dumbledore didn’t think he really was either.”

They sat in silence for a time. Ron fidgeted with a tear in the armchair, while Hermione stared up at the ceiling. Harry repeated the vow the vow he’d made repeatedly to himself over the last years, ever since Dumbledore’s portrait had given them hope for a future without devastating loss. *I’ll be ready this time,* Harry vowed.

“What’d you think of the rest of the book?” Ron asked after a time.

Hermione snorted. “A lot of it is complete rubbish. The triumvirate of mind magic is about the only thing useful; that, and there’s a very interesting section on memory charms. I do wonder if the author wasn’t insane.”

“How so?” Harry asked, confused.

“Well, for one, why would he use that stupid nickname – the Wise Asp?” she scoffed. “Why not just use his own name instead of a ridiculous nickname? And he wrote about all sorts of the things that couldn’t possibly be real. Not that I don’t appreciate the gift...” she assured them.

Ginny had mocked the ridiculous nickname of the author as well.

“The Wise Asp?” She asked, grinning, holding the thick and obviously old tome in her hands. “The author is a genius that chooses to go by a nickname that sounds like ‘wise ass?’”

Dumbledore’s portrait chuckled. “I must admit that it sounds humorous to me as well. But it is my thought that the man – or woman – was in Slytherin, and wished to pay homage to his old house. But also, it is a reference to the Wise Ape, a former governor on an island in ancient days. He was also a wizard, and he ruled both wizards and Muggles. This was before the statute of secrecy. It is said that his library rivaled that of the Library of Alexandria when it came to arcane knowledge.”

“Still,” Ginny said. “It sounds bad.”

*“Some geniuses have little in the way of common sense.”
Dumbledore agreed.*

“I liked the Tears of Merlin bit,” Ron offered. “I thought it was really interesting.”

“It was interesting,” Hermione agreed. “But don’t you think it belonged in a book of fairy tales? It’s completely impossible.”

“How do you know?” Ron muttered. Harry tried not to watch them too eagerly. Ron was being a bit reckless, he felt, but he found himself wanting to hear Hermione’s answer.

“Time traveling?” Hermione asked incredulously. “Sending memories back years and years?”

“My dad told me that they have Time-Turners in the Ministry,” Ron pointed out. “I don’t know about years and years, but they can definitely manage a few hours.”

“The Tears of Merlin doesn’t exist, Ron,” Hermione said exasperatedly. “And even if it did – did you read what it *required*? It’s terrible. I frankly can’t imagine anyone being that desperate.”

Hermione has no idea, Harry thought as he crawled into his bed later that evening. It was early yet; Ron was still playing a rather loud game of Exploding Snap with Neville. Harry had been playing with them, but pleaded a headache when Neville won his fourth consecutive game and made to set it up again. He forced the thought away and focused on emptying his mind. Until he had spoken with Snape, he couldn’t afford to ignore his practice.

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“*Try*, Potter!” Snape growled from in front of him. He’d just broken into Harry’s mind again with what seemed like little effort. It was two days after the discussion he and Ron had had with Hermione, and Harry had not experienced any sort of miraculous change with his Occlumency skills.

“*I am*,” Harry snarled through gritted teeth.

“If you want to save all your little friends this time around, you’d better try harder,” Snape warned viciously. “Honestly, Potter, you can defeat the Dark Lord, travel through time, and you *still* can’t muster the concentration required to become an Occlumens?”

Harry panted, and rested his head against the cold stone wall of the dungeons. It was evening, and he’d had a particularly long day. He’d had another nightmare, and could not fall back to sleep despite the fact that it had only been four in the morning.

“Professor,” he said, ignoring Snape’s question, and winced. It felt like his head had been split open with a dull axe. “Sir, do you think I should try Obfuscomency instead?”

Snape looked stunned for a moment, but hid it quickly. "Is that what you eventually did last time?"

"No, no, I'd never even heard of it until Hermione Granger told me about it two days ago," Harry replied. He quickly told him about what had transpired in the common room two days before.

"Was that wise? Giving the Granger girl that book?"

Harry paused. "I hope so. We're going to tell her eventually, and we've set the stage a bit. Perhaps it'll open her mind a little. Also, it inspired her to learn Occlumency on her own. That can only be a good thing."

"If she can. You seem unable to."

Harry grinned despite himself. "Hermione's not at all like me. She's more rational. I think the only person less suited for Occlumency than me is Ron. We're both too..." he searched for a word that described his inability to learn the shield. "Reckless, I suppose. We're not pragmatic enough. I dunno. It makes me wonder why the Hat wanted to put us in Slytherin."

Snape's mouth twisted, as if he had just swallowed something very bitter. "Your plan is very cunning and ambitious. You obviously know that these are traits that my House is known for."

Harry hid a smile. It was perhaps the first compliment that Snape had ever given him, and he did not look happy to have done so.

"About Obfuscomency..."

"Yes," Snape rubbed his chin. "I must admit to some surprise that I did not think of this sooner. Or at all in your timeline. Now it seems obvious that you must train yourself in this. The fact that you have a wealth of other memories to choose from makes it tailor made to your situation. I might have to give Granger a few points for Gryffindor when she answers a question tomorrow. Or perhaps just allow her to answer one – you know how she likes to be a know-it-all."

“What exactly *is* Obfuscomency?” Harry asked. Hermione’s explanation had not gone into any sort of depth.

“To put it simply, it is a shield of sorts, like Occlumency, but instead of a wall, there will be a maze of memories,” Snape said. “Again, it is well-suited to you. While it takes everyone else much effort to choose the memories that would be appropriate, you have them already. *Why* I didn’t think of this sooner... No matter.”

“But won’t Voldemort –“

“Do not say his name!” Snape hissed.

“Sorry, sir. But won’t You-Know-Who be able get through this maze?”

“Obfuscomency is a spiral.”

When Harry looked completely blank, he continued. “I suggest that you put nearly all of your memories from the past – up until the moment you meet Quirrell – into this spiral. And I mean all your memories. It would be nearly impossible for the Dark Lord to maintain the connection long enough to make it through all of them. And, since it’s a spiral, it would repeat itself, moving upward through the years. You begin with the most recent, and end with the very first things you remember. And then it moves from begins again.”

Harry started to understand. “How do I do it, sir?”

“Well... you have to start by...”

HPHPHPHPHP

Not even the rain-washed April could dampen Harry’s spirits as he sat underneath his Invisibility Cloak a little ways off the road to Hogsmeade. He was waiting for Dumbledore to take him to the Gaunt shack where they would liberate and destroy the ring Horcrux. Ron would have gone with them, but he was ‘serving detention’ with Professor Snape, neither of whom was pleased. Ron wanted to either be with Harry and Dumbledore – despite his wariness of Horcruxes – or at the Quidditch pitch, watching the match between Gryffindor and

Slytherin. But he did not have the same background in Occlumency that Harry did, and he was not as quick to pick of Obfuscomency.

Not that Harry was a perfect Obfuscomens. But he and Snape had reckoned that he had a good grasp on it, enough to counter any Legilimency Voldemort might use during his first encounter with Harry. He did not nearly have all of his memories included in the spiral of the Obfuscomency shield, but he had enough that he was certain Voldemort would not suspect a thing.

The mystery of the Philosopher's Stone was well underway. Hermione had thrown herself into searching for clues. She suspected Snape – which amused Ron and Harry to no end, and they'd had several laughs about it in the Room of Requirement – but, with a tiny nudge from Harry, she'd also begun to suspect Professor Quirrell. Harry had mentioned that he'd overheard Quirrell talking to someone without even a hint of a stutter.

"Harry," Dumbledore said softly, cutting through his thoughts. Harry got up and followed him down the road. Both were silent during the fifteen minutes it took to reach a small alley beside the Hog's Head Inn. Harry waited for him right outside the back door, while Dumbledore entered the front and immediately exited.

Moments later, maintaining a tight grip on Dumbledore's forearm, Harry felt the familiar, unsettling feeling of being squeezed through a tube.

"That went well," Harry offered.

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed amicably. He held out a small cup to Harry. "I've taken the liberty of acquiring a few strands of hair from a Muggle, Harry. I think it best if you're well disguised. Even out here."

Harry took it, and grimaced before he drank the entire potion down. It was just as vile as he remembered. As soon as his body lengthened and grew stouter, he pulled off his cloak.

"A *woman*?!" Harry looked down at his body incredulously. He was a stout, older lady who was roughly the same size and shape as his old neighbor, Arabella Figg.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled madly. "I thought it best. It adds further layers of deception to our presence. We're an old man and his daughter out for a walk, perhaps."

"It could easily have been an old man and his son! You're enjoying this," Harry accused. Dumbledore did not even attempt to deny it, but motioned him forward. Feeling awkward in this completely different body, he did so. His breasts – his *breasts!* – jiggled as he walked. He could not help but feel mortified.

The shack previously owned by the Gaunt family came into sight after five minutes of trudging up the dusty, little-used road that connected Little Hangleton and Great Hangleton. At one point, Harry stopped to shield his eyes with his hand and gaze in the direction of the small cemetery he knew was there. If all went to plan, he would be there in three years, watching as Wormtail resurrected Voldemort once more.

The Gaunt shack was even more over-grown and ramshackle than Harry remembered. The walls were practically falling down, and they looked decayed and like to fall down with a strong wind. The sight of it caused him to remember a question he'd had for years and years.

"Professor, why didn't Voldemort protect any of his Horcruxes with the Fidelius Charm?"

"I believe that Voldemort thought his protections sufficient," Dumbledore replied. "And the nature of the Fidelius Charm would not appeal to him, despite its ability to protect a location beyond almost anything else."

"How so?"

"The Fidelius Charm requires at least two people. Did you never wonder why your mother and father did not simply cast the charm themselves? Or, from what you've shown me in your memories, why I was the Secret Keeper for Grimmauld Place?" Dumbledore asked him. "In order for the charm to work, the secret must be *entrusted*, which is where the name of it came from. Voldemort would never give anyone such a valuable gift, it is not in his nature to trust, as I am sure you know."

“But he trusted Lucius Malfoy with the diary and Bellatrix Lestrange with the cup,” Harry felt compelled to point out.

“Ah, but he did not tell him what they were. The Fidelius Charm would have required him to tell another soul what he was about. It isn’t just the location that is a secret, Harry.”

Harry mulled that over in his mind while Dumbledore opened the door. He’d never thought about it before, which surprised him. How could he have never wondered why his parents had had to choose a Secret Keeper besides themselves?

“It is here,” Dumbledore interrupted his thoughts. Harry felt a wave of relief. He had wondered if the Ripple Effect – as he and Ron called it now – would change the locations of some of the Horcruxes.

“Give me a moment, Harry,” Dumbledore said, and lifted his wand. He muttered several different spells under his breath, although Harry had no idea what they could be. He heard a bang and a flash of light, and felt an invisible hand pressing him back against the less-than-sturdy wall.

“There it is,” he heard, and the pressure lifted. He told himself to remember to ask Dumbledore what he had done to break the concealments.

A floorboard had been lifted up, though Dumbledore had not moved, revealing a small box. Stupidly, Harry moved forward.

“Harry, no!” Dumbledore tried to stop him but it was too late.

Pain. Pain beyond all reason racked Harry’s body and he fell heavily to the floor. He screamed and screamed, an anguished, pitiful sound like nothing he had heard himself make. Not even the Cruciatus Curse could turn his every nerve ending against him. It traveled like waves and waves of fire, and he couldn’t think as he buckled and seized upon the dirty floor. *No, no, no, no, no more.*

Gradually, it began to ease. His limbs jerked with spasms, but the intensity of the fire that traveled through his body receded until it was

only a memory. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Harry heard someone say, and realized it was himself speaking.

"Pay attention to me!" an old man shouted, gripping his shoulders and shaking him. "Pay attention! Do you know who you are?"

"I'm sorry," Harry said again. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Tell me who you are!"

Harry licked his lips, thinking. The effort hurt, but he wanted the man to stop shaking him. Who was he? He wasn't a woman, he was certain of it. He was a boy, trapped in a woman's body... His name was Harry. Harry Potter. His parents were dead, they'd been murdered, and whoever murdered them wanted to kill him too. He thought about that, and decided the man's name was Voldemort, or maybe it was Tom Riddle? No, it was both. He had a stupid nickname, like the Marauders, like the Half-Blood Prince, like the Wise Asp... *Always and always*. Something cracked inside his head, and clarity returned.

He sat up straight, and winced when his stomach clenched. He leaned away from Albus Dumbledore and vomited onto the floor. A little of it splashed on the dress he was wearing.

"I'm Harry Potter, and I traveled from the future using the Tears of Merlin," he told him, once he'd thrown up everything he'd eaten for the last day. "I remember it. I remember everything. I'm sorry, I was so *stupid*."

"An easy mistake to make," Dumbledore said weakly. "I thought you were lost. You didn't say anything for five minutes, and then you started saying you were sorry, and that was all I could get you to say."

"What was it?"

"A terrible curse. I didn't even know it was there until you walked right into it. I take it the other Albus Dumbledore did not tell you about it?"

Harry shook his head. "You... he... probably didn't think I'd need to know. He'd already gotten the ring."

"Only moments longer and I fear all would have been lost..."
Dumbledore looked badly shaken and strangely vulnerable.

Harry gripped the wizard's forearm. His fingers still shook from the curse. "I'm glad I told you," Harry said. "I think I need you more now than I did then, which is saying quite a lot."

Dumbledore took several deep breaths and rose to his feet. Harry wanted to do the same, but he wasn't sure that his legs would hold him upright.

"Professor," he said. "Don't put on the ring."

Harry watched as he carefully made his way to the small box. He was not worried; Dumbledore knew that the ring was cursed, and would not fall into temptation as he had the last time. He would not find himself with a cursed, deadened hand and only a year to live. Snape would hopefully not need to kill him atop the Astronomy Tower.

Still, he watched, and was glad he did. As soon as the box was opened, Dumbledore's face *changed*. His eyes were blank, and he smiled a wistful, happy smile that was out of place. Harry watched with horror as he reached inside and took the ring.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" Harry shouted. And despite the fact that his legs were shaky along with the rest of his body, he hurtled toward Dumbledore and knocked it out of his hand just as he was about to slip it on his finger. Dumbledore fell sideways with a grunt. The strange woman's body was heavier than Harry had ever been in his life.

He looked at the ring, and decided it was safer if *he* was the one to touch it. With that thought, he picked it up. Dumbledore obviously could not stand the temptation to hear words of comfort from Ariana, and from his parents...

His parents. Harry could use the Resurrection Stone to see his parents. They would reassure him that what he was doing was right.

They would tell him that they were proud of him, that he could do this. And he could tell them that he was sorry for not trying to change the past enough that they would still be alive. Guilt nearly crushed him. He forgot the curse that had caused the other Dumbledore's death, and the fact that he would never have been able to save Lily and James Potter. He *had* to tell them that he was sorry, and the only way to do that would be to put on the ring...

There was a loud bang and Harry found himself thrown backward and through the wall. The ring clattered to the floor, unnaturally loud.

"Let's stay away from that ring," Harry said finally.

"Ingenious," Dumbledore murmured. Then, louder, "You are quite right, Harry. That's one of the vilest curses I have ever seen – I mean no offense, the pain curse was quite horrible. But this... like an Imperius Curse, it made us forget what we were doing, and what we were about. It tried to trap us into death. I assume you meant to use the Resurrection Stone as well?"

"Yes," Harry answered. "The other Dumbledore thought that he hadn't any idea what the Stone was, though; he only thought it was a priceless heirloom."

"And I still suspect it," Dumbledore said. "I believe that if anyone else besides the two of us – and Mr. Weasley, Mrs. Potter, and Professor Snape, of course – would simply put on the ring, despite the danger. We were particularly vulnerable, I believe. But we will never know for sure. I'm going to destroy it with Fiendfyre."

"But –"

"Do not worry, when Voldemort returns to Little Hangleton, the Gaunt shack will stand once more. We will rebuild it. Later. Now, are you able to perform the spell of protection that will shield us from curious onlookers?"

Harry strode around the shack in a wide circle, murmuring the spells Hermione had taught him while they'd been on the run. He did it almost absently. *The other Dumbledore never knew about the curse*, he thought. *He just thought that he'd been weak and tempted by the*

Stone enough to cause his own death. And I didn't even question it; I thought he'd been weak, too. The thought made him strangely sad. Dumbledore, who had seemed to know everything, had been tricked into thinking he'd made a terrible mistake.

"Will it destroy the Stone?" Harry asked, coming to a halt beside Dumbledore who stood on the threshold.

"Yes," he said. "I'm certain of it. Fiendfyre is even more destructive than Basilisk venom, for not only does it destroy the physical, it destroys the spells and magic of that which is destroyed. It will no longer be a Hallow."

Harry blew out a slow breath, and remembered the one and only time he had used the Stone. His parents... Sirius... Remus... what he'd thought were all the Weasleys and Hermione... Luna... Neville. Seeing them had given him the desire to basically commit suicide to be with them, though he did not like to think about that. The Horcrux inside of him had been killed instead. And he had returned to find that Ginny and Ron had yet lived, otherwise he might have done it again. While it was an uncomfortable thought, he wondered if he'd be able to willingly put himself in the path of the Killing Curse if he was not also the Master of Death. He wasn't sure that it was wholly his mother's blood that had saved him.

He knew without having to ask that Dumbledore too regretted the necessity of destroying the Stone. The older man had lost loved ones as well, loved ones to whom he wished to speak, and the Resurrection Stone was his only chance... He also knew what Harry did, and how the fact that he had united the three Deathly Hallows had played a part in his continued survival.

"Do it," Harry said quietly.

They watched the shack burn, side by side, a few feet away from the destructive flames. Harry heard an eerie, keening scream and knew that it was done. He felt a mixture of relief and foreboding.

"Don't tell them," Harry said, thinking of Ron and Ginny, and how they would react to the uncertainty of Harry's survival. Dumbledore seemed to understand.

Chapter 5 – The Dragon and The Stone

It was not until the day before Harry and Hermione were due to liberate the dragon, Norbert (Harry had almost blurted out that they ought to call it 'Norberta' instead, but stopped himself just in time), from Hagrid's hut and send him off to Charlie, that Dumbledore made good on his promise to provide Harry with a copy of the article. Both of them had forgotten.

They heard Dumbledore's footsteps before he disillusioned himself so that Harry and Snape could see him. Ron was in the hospital wing, having his bitten hand attended to by Madam Pomfrey. It had amused Snape to no end that Ron had found himself bitten again, even though he knew well enough to avoid it. He had even been – well, not nice, but less biting since Harry had told him.

Harry noticed immediately that Dumbledore held a copy of an old edition of the *Daily Prophet*, and his eyes widened. "You brought it! Blimey, I'd completely forgotten."

"You've had a busy term," he said. "As have I."

"You're giving him the article?" Snape was surprised.

"He asked to see it," Dumbledore said mildly. "I don't think we should keep it from him. Do you have a reason for not wanting him to read it?"

"I'm sitting right here," Harry said irritably.

Snape ignored him. "I would not be surprised if he did something rash, like getting on the wrong end of a curse that nearly steals what few wits he has." Snape had been on hand when Dumbledore and Harry had returned from their adventure outside Little Hangleton, and had supplied him with the potion that caused the tremors to finally abate.

"I'm not going to do anything rash," said Harry.

"I don't believe he will, Severus," said Dumbledore, as if Harry hadn't spoken. "Besides, there isn't much he could do even if he wanted to."

“Just give me the damn article,” said Harry. Before the other two could continue arguing, he snatched it out of Dumbledore’s grasp, and began to read.

HARRY POTTER, THE PROPHECY, AND HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED

In the six years since the fall of You-Know-Who, the Wizarding world, both in Britain and abroad, has viewed young Harry Potter as a savior. It is true that You-Know-Who could not kill him on the Halloween night that resulted in the deaths of James and Lily Potter. The child survived the Killing Curse – a feat that is unheard of – and You-Know-Who disappeared. These are the facts that led to the celebrations throughout Britain, and also why Harry Potter and his scar are famous. The fact that it was revealed that there was indeed a prophecy that foretold this happenstance – in which Harry Potter was named ‘the Chosen One’ – only made the downfall of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named even more a cause for joy after so many years of darkness.

And yet experts on prophecy are troubled. One Regan Forthill, son of renowned Seer July Forthill, expressed his misgivings on the matter. “Prophecies and oracles and things of that nature have never been predictable, my mother always said. She told me of many times throughout her lifetime when she Saw something, was certain of the meaning, and yet turned out to be completely wrong,” he said, speaking to me from his home in Devon. This is fact. It is said that there is a Hall of Prophecy within the Department of Mysteries in our own Ministry of Magic. It is also fact that the great Nezenam Institute in Russia has an extensive library relating to prophecies and prophets, and they have always maintained that no human mind could possibly consider all the ramifications of any prophecy. An even more damning source is that of the centaurs, known to possess the skills of reading the stars that humans lack. A centaur that lives with the herd in the Forbidden Forest discussed with me at length what he had read in the stars. At this moment in time, the Wizarding world lies between two great wars. He claims that this time of peace is a brief respite, and one that will not last another even another decade. The centaur prefers to remain anonymous because of the sensitive nature of these claims, but they are true nonetheless. Due to the

unpredictable nature of prophecies, I am certain that it would be a wiser course to be watchful rather than jubilant, careful instead of automatically trusting, and cautious instead of open-armed.

Less cautious witches and wizards will point to the fact that Harry Potter is, at the moment I am writing this, aged seven years old, and only just experiencing accidental magic. However, in four years, the child will be attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and there he will learn power, and tools that he may use for good or for ill. The first part of the prophecy has been well-known almost since it was made. And it seemed to come to fruition with the downfall of You-Know-Who. But I am suspicious of this 'terrible' power that Harry Potter is destined to have. What about that baby could stop the most powerful dark wizard in centuries? Have we seen the last of it, or will this second war that the centaur predicted be against Harry Potter, thought to be the savior of the Wizarding world? Given all that is unknown, I think it wise to consider these possibilities.

Again, I will point out the fact that Harry Potter is only seven years old. But He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was a child once as well. There are curious likenesses between the two: Harry Potter is also an orphan, and it is safe to assume that he will grow up to be a powerful wizard. Even the very nature of the prophecy made about both of them hints that there is an odd connection between their two destinies. The question must be asked: is Harry Potter responsible for the defeat of You-Know-Who, or is he the next You-Know-Who? Or even worse? The likelihood of him become a great wizard is shared equally with him becoming a threat the likes of which the world has never seen. The fact that the entire Wizarding world believes him to be the epitome of good is even more disturbing. You-Know-Who had to work to gain his followers, but every wizard, witch, and child knows the name of Harry Potter. He is known throughout the world. He will not have any problem at all gaining followers – unless we are careful.

By the time Harry had finished reading, his belly was clenched in a tight fist and he felt slightly nauseated. The worst part of it was that it was imminently reasonable, as Dumbledore had claimed. It was logical, well thought out, and did not strike him as written for the express purpose of inspiring fear.

“Harry...”

But Harry waved his arm. “I need... I need a moment.”

He had a greater understanding of Mrs. Weasley’s wariness. Some part of her probably feared that Harry was turning her own son into a Death Eater. And the odd things that had happened this year, such as the more thoughtful reaction to Harry’s Sorting, and the fact that the Slytherins did not taunt him that much. Even Draco Malfoy, despite his cutting comments, had sometimes looked at him with calculation rather than scorn. It only really hit him just now that while he’d received applause when he had been Sorted into Gryffindor, he had also been on the receiving end of a lot of assessing looks. He’d explained away the Slytherins by telling himself that the taunts had been because he was on the Gryffindor House team. But perhaps it was because they were afraid of him, afraid that if he did turn out to be a new Dark Lord he would remember them. And Draco... Draco had probably been warned by his father not to be too much of a git. Lucius Malfoy still believed that Voldemort was dead, never to return...

Ron and Ginny needed to be told as soon as possible what this article contained; it was subtler than they’d thought it would be, and therefore more dangerous. And, thinking of Ron, Harry finally spoke, “So... What do you think I should call my followers?” He wanted to be able to laugh this off.

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, the two of you are my followers. I’ve used my status as the ‘Chosen One’ and you’ve succumbed to my dark glamour,” Harry swallowed. He sounded too bitter. “I ought to think of a good name, and I reckon you two have got a say in it. ‘Death Eater’ is already taken. How about Night Crawlers?”

Dumbledore and Snape exchanged glances. “I can see why this has upset you, Harry.”

“I’m not upset,” Harry denied truthfully. “I’m really not.”

“Could have fooled me,” Snape muttered.

"It's just started a little earlier than last time. It wasn't until my fourth year that things got bad," said Harry. "And like you told me months ago, Dumbledore, saving the Stone from Voldemort will go a long way to proving the article wrong. It's just... I'm disturbed."

"Rightfully so," Dumbledore murmured. "I think anyone would find this disturbing. I certainly did. Especially when I found out that, despite the fact that the quote from Regan Forthill was entirely true, he had no recollection of speaking to anyone about it. The centaurs also have made it clear that although the stars do say that we are in brief respite between wars, none of them had talked to any human about it. After that first week when you and Mr. Weasley handed me your amazing news, I went again to Regan Forthill's home. I found out that he had died."

"Murder?"

"No, by all accounts it was a perfectly natural death. He was very old, you see, and had contracted Dragon Pox. There was an outbreak of it about two years ago. He died in St. Mungo's. I had wanted to ascertain whether or not a memory charm had been placed on him," he explained.

"What of the centaurs?" Snape asked. "I presume you spoke to them again?"

"Indeed," Dumbledore nodded. "They had no new information. However, it is almost impossible – and I would say that it *is* impossible, except Harry here has reminded me that I am capable of being surprised – to use a memory charm on a centaur."

"You think they lied." It wasn't a question.

"It is the most likely possibility," he agreed. "Although I can't imagine why they would. While the centaurs have been, for the most part, nominally neutral, that is only because they refuse to take sides in wizarding affairs, much like the goblins. However, also like the goblins, they have no reason to support Voldemort, or to defame Harry."

"Another mystery," Harry said glumly.

“I still think he’s going to do something rash,” Snape said.

“I’m not,” Harry shook his head. “I can’t afford to. It’s just such an odd feeling, to be back in this body again, and have this desire to prove myself again. I grew out of it long ago. And it’s different. I’m not afraid that of being famous, I accepted that. I just... I want people to know that I’d never be like Voldemort.”

“They will,” Dumbledore promised. Harry had to look away from the compassion he saw in his eyes.

HPHPHPHPHPHP

Norberta raised quite a fuss. Then again, so did Hagrid.

“He’s going to miss his mummy,” Hagrid sobbed into a handkerchief the size of a bed sheet. “He’s never been away from me before... he’s just a baby...”

Hermione patted Hagrid’s arm as his sobs grew harder and harder. “Hagrid, you’re doing what’s best for your... baby. Norbert will be able to grow up with other dragons; he might even find a lady friend when he’s old enough.”

“I know... I know...” Hagrid swiped at his eyes. “But – I’ll m-m-miss him.”

“I’m sure he’ll miss you too,” Harry looked dubiously at the dragon. They’d made a makeshift carrier for it, and already he was worrying at the straps with his sharp teeth.

Finally, Hagrid allowed them to go, and his cries echoed after them all the way up to the tower. Harry and Hermione huddled under the invisibility cloak, hoping that they would not be given away by the snarls and growls that came from Norberta while she tore apart the teddy bear Hagrid had given her as a going-away gift. Despite the fact that Harry knew that they would see Norberta off safely with Charlie’s mates, his heart pounded in his chest, and he was quite relieved when they reached the top of the stairs.

“Did you hear Malfoy?” Hermione beamed. “Detention! And twenty points from Slytherin because he tried to get us in trouble!”

Harry could not help but laugh with her; she was so openly delighted at the prospect of Malfoy in trouble. *We'll have precious few laughs when everyone hates us*, Harry thought reasonably.

“We did it, we did it!” Hermione squealed, and whirled around on of the stairs. She continued the victory dance that she’d begun on the top of the Astronomy Tower, and Harry had to grab her elbow to keep her from falling over.

Hermione’s excitement was infectious – it was a good thing that Harry had already planned to get detention. He hadn’t before, but now he wanted to have a legitimate reason for speaking to the centaur, Firenze. Even if they’d had the invisibility cloak, Argus Filch was not deaf, and they were making quite enough noise to alert him.

“Well, well, we *are* in trouble,” Filch stepped out from the shadows at the bottom of the long stair. Hermione screamed.

He dragged them to Professor McGonagall’s office, his face lit with unholy glee. He muttered threats under his breath the entire way, and Hermione sobbed.

Fifteen uncomfortable minutes later, Harry, Hermione, and Neville marched in silence back to Gryffindor Tower. Hermione was beyond tears now; so shocked that she had lost Gryffindor fifty points, she could not even speak. Neville, pale and shaking, was wide-eyed.

“Neville,” Harry put a hand on his shoulder, and the other boy started. “Neville, I’m so sorry.”

“Harry, it’s all my fault!” Neville turned to look at him, an anguished look on his face. “If I hadn’t followed you – “

“It isn’t your fault, Neville,” Harry said sternly. “You were trying to *help* us!”

“B-b-but you didn’t need help,” Neville pointed out. “I just got Gryffindor into even more trouble. I deserve it, but you guys don’t. There really was a dragon, wasn’t there?”

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks. “Yeah,” Harry said in a low voice, and slowed down once they neared the corridor where the Fat Lady hung. “But please don’t tell, it’ll just get Hagrid into trouble.”

Neville moaned, and put his face in his hands. “They’re going to be so *angry*.”

And he was right. Gryffindor had been vying for the second place slot with Ravenclaw, but the subtraction of a hundred and fifty points had dropped them so far in the rear that they could not hope to catch up. Harry briefly wondered if Dumbledore would give them enough points that they would overcome Slytherin again, but he doubted it. They were over two hundred points behind.

Harry managed the jeers and scowls and naked dislike rather well. He knew when to duck his head and let it slide by. At least Ron stood beside him, and was rather aggressive in defending him, Hermione, and Neville to their peers. And, strangely enough, Percy Weasley was surprisingly forgiving.

“Breaking the rules is never without consequence,” Percy said pompously three days after the incident. They were on their way to breakfast early – to avoid the mad rush when they’d have to deal with more of their fellow Gryffindors.

“I know,” Neville said miserably. The shunning and downright hatred had hit him the hardest. The fact that he had received a Howler from his grandmother the day before had not helped.

“But I think the rest of them are being rather spiteful,” Percy said. “I lost ten points for Gryffindor once in my first year.”

“It wasn’t fifty,” Ron said fairly. “Ten points is nothing compared to this. And there are three of them.”

Percy straightened to his full height. “That isn’t the *point*, Ron. The entire house is being hateful – I’d think that losing the points and

getting yet another detention would be punishment enough. Especially since there was a good – “ But he abruptly closed his mouth.

“You know?” Harry asked in a low voice.

“Not until yesterday,” Percy said in a hushed voice. “Charlie sent me a letter, said that there was a good chance that you and your friends would be out way past curfew, Ron. It wasn’t difficult to put together the pieces. Ron’s bite, the fanciful tale about a dragon that Malfoy was spreading around, and how else would Charlie know about it?”

Harry and Ron exchanged wide-eyed glances. “We wrote to him,” Ron said in a hushed voice. “When we found out that Ha – er, when we found out that someone had an illegal dragon.”

“In the future, Ron,” Percy drew himself up to his full height. “And you too, Hermione, and Harry, and Neville, you should come to me with something like this. I am a prefect and – “

“But we didn’t want anyone to get into trouble!” Ron said loudly.

“And no one would have. Prefects are allowed out after curfew,” Percy told him. Then he swept inside the Great Hall, leaving them standing there, stunned.

Harry thought about Percy’s words a lot in the days leading up to their detention. He and Ron had spoken about it for over an hour when they met in the Room of Requirement. Harry was certain that Percy had received the letter so long ago, and equally certain that he had figured out that they had, in fact, saved Hagrid from getting into a lot of trouble with the Ministry.

“It’s because we’re treating him better,” Ron said, his mouth full of Chocolate Frog. “He knew back then, but he isn’t as stand-offish now.”

“Even the other Percy wasn’t as vicious as the rest of them,” Harry said slowly. “He was cold, but that might have been because we’d broken the rules.”

“Did you hear him?” Ron laughed. “He actually hinted that he would’ve taken the dragon to meet Charlie’s mates. Can you picture the other Percy doing that?”

“No,” said Harry.

They did not have the chance to meet without the presence of Hermione and Neville very often anymore. The four of them stuck together for the most part, united in the face of the entire school’s dislike. Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students were still annoyed with them; while – Harry thought with some pride – the Gryffindor Quidditch team was not as good as it had been when he was on it, they had made a rather good showing during the last match. They had flattened Hufflepuff by almost two hundred points, and if they beat Slytherin in the match set to take place while Harry recovered from his encounter with Voldemort, they stood a chance to win the Cup.

Thus the four banded together for protection, and Ron and Harry had to keep inventing excuses to get away.

“I’ll be glad when this year is over,” Harry said with a sigh. “Next year won’t be fun, but at least Ginny’ll be here.”

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Harry felt as though he was walking with ghosts as he, Hagrid, Hermione, Neville, and Draco Malfoy stepped onto the path that led into the Forbidden Forest. For a moment, everything shifted, and he was in the body of a twenty one year old.

Almost everyone he loved was dead. They were gone forever, they were never coming back. Tom Riddle was also gone, but Harry, who had spent the last decade fighting for that end, did not seem to care.

He staggered onto the path that led to the Forbidden Forest, just outside Hagrid’s hut. It looked like Hagrid too was dying of wounds inflicted by Voldemort’s giants; emergency healers from St. Mungo’s had looked as though there was little hope. This was what Harry had fought for? To be the last man standing? It seemed so ridiculous that

Harry had laughed, a mad and wild sound that frightened him. It seemed to echo strangely among the trees.

He looked down at the Stone still held tightly in his palm. He had dropped it when he had been struck by Voldemort's Killing Curse. He did not want to summon them again. It had been all right when he had thought he was about to die. He'd been about to join them, they were fetching him. But now... how could he possibly bear the guilt of surviving? All of them... they'd died like they were supposed to, whether it was by the Killing Curse, or flame, or some other method. But no, he was Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. It seemed like he was the only one who lived.

He flung the Stone into the trees as far as it would go. He couldn't possibly face them, not when it was so bloody unfair that he still breathed and they did not.

He knelt on the ground, and gripped his hair in his hands, pulling so tightly on it that it hurt. He wondered how he would do it. Should he slit his wrists with Gryffindor's Sword – how was that for irony? Jump from the Astronomy Tower, his body broken and bent like Dumbledore's? Had it actually come to this? He was plotting his own death, instead of Voldemort's...

Harry was so lost in that memory, that Hermione's touch on his arm and quiet "Harry?" caused him to fall over in the nearby bushes. For a moment he had no bearing on where he was or who he was.

"All right, Harry?" Hagrid looked back at him.

"Scared, Potter?" Malfoy sneered.

"Not as scared as you," Harry retorted, pulling himself out of the bushes.

He made an effort, after that, to stay in this time. He asked Hagrid questions about the unicorns, and talked quietly with Hermione – when Hagrid was not listening – about the Stone. He felt relieved, though, when Draco scared Neville and he parted company with Hagrid and Hermione. They knew him too well, and he could parry Draco's comments with ease.

Never thought I'd see the day when I was grateful for Malfoy's company, Harry thought darkly.

His scar warned him when Voldemort was near. Dimly, he registered Malfoy's screams and his flight away. But he kept his eyes on the dark shadow that desecrated the flesh of the unicorn. He had a better understanding now of what it actually meant. Voldemort, as Dumbledore had told him, had gone so far beyond usual evil that he had no trouble with destroying innocence and purity for his own ends. The unicorn's death foreshadowed the death of Harry's generation's innocence. *The flower of a generation...*

"Harry Potter," the centaur, Firenze, said. "It is not safe for you especially to be in these woods."

Harry blinked. Voldemort was gone, frightened away, and Firenze stood before him. "I didn't think the centaurs liked me much," Harry said cautiously.

"You have read the article?" Firenze asked.

"Yes," Harry answered. "I thought that the centaurs thought that I'm going to be evil."

"No, no, no," Firenze said mournfully, shaking his head. "The article twisted my own words. Yes, it was my own words. Though I never told a human. Harry Potter, do you know what is in the castle at this very moment?"

"The Philosopher's Stone?"

"Indeed," he said. "Can you not think of anyone who would be so desperate as to kill a unicorn?"

"That shadow... It was Lord Voldemort?" Harry forced himself to sound surprised.

"It was. I read in the stars long ago that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named will rise again," Firenze told him. "He is not dead..."

"And he's coming for me," Harry said quietly.

"Come, get on my back, I will take you to Hagrid," Firenze knelt down so Harry could clamber on. He was far more mindful this time of the fact that it was quite unusual for a centaur to allow a human to ride him.

"Er, thank you for doing this," Harry said awkwardly once the centaur had slowed a bit, wanting to say something. "It doesn't feel right, you know, treating you like you're a regular horse."

"He is right, Firenze," came a low, angry voice. Two centaurs stepped out of the shadows. Harry immediately slid off Firenze's back. "He is a foal and he is wiser than you."

Firenze flared up at once. "Do you know who this child is? This is Harry Potter, and he was nearly killed tonight by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!"

"You should not set yourself against the stars, brother," the other centaur said. Harry searched his memory until he came up with a name: Magorian. The doleful one.

"I do not set myself against the stars," Firenze argued.

"You know what is fated to happen; it is not for us to interfere."

Through the prism of knowledge that Harry had not had the first time around, he realized something with a jolt. The centaurs *knew*. They knew that one day Harry would stand and take another Killing Curse at the hand of Voldemort. And they knew that the consequences of this not happening were dire: the continued existence of Voldemort, and the threat of a world plunged in a darkness that could only be averted by Harry's death. He gazed up at the night sky, and could barely see the stars twinkling through the thick foliage. *Perhaps I haven't given Bane and Magorian enough credit*, Harry thought ruefully. *Maybe they don't know the fullness of the prophecy or the Horcrux inside of me, but they know more than I realized the last time.*

"Harry Potter, listen to me," Firenze said in a low and urgent voice once Bane and Magorian had cantered deeper into the wood. "It is not safe for you to be alone in these woods."

"I realize that now," Harry said quietly. "Thank you again for carrying me; and thanks for stopping Voldemort from killing me."

Firenze stared at him with such unnerving intensity that Harry began to wonder what else the stars had told the centaurs. But the arrival of Hagrid and the others broke the spell, and Harry never had a chance to ask him.

Harry was up early the next morning, despite his lack of sleep. He put on his school robes, grabbed his wand and book bag, and trotted down the stairs. The common room was completely empty, so he threw himself down onto the most comfortable armchair. The house elves had tended the fire and it crackled merrily in the hearth. Looking at it, Harry suddenly wished that he could speak to Sirius.

But Sirius was still in Azkaban, and would still be there for some time yet. Guilt welled up inside him.

"Harry?" Neville's voice.

"Yeah?" Harry tipped his head back to smile at the pudgy boy.

"Are – are you all right? After last night, I mean."

"I'm fine," he said.

"Well..." Neville looked as though he did not believe Harry. But to Harry's relief, Neville chose not to push it. "Have you – Do you want to study for the transfiguration exam?"

"Only if you help me with Herbology."

Perhaps half an hour passed while Harry quizzed Neville on transfiguring inanimate objects into other inanimate objects. Neville, in turn, had a wealth of knowledge when it came to the first year plants they were required to know.

"Don't tell anyone, Professor Sprout wants it kept a secret, but we're getting Mandrakes next year!" Neville whispered, his face alight with excitement.

“You know a lot about plants,” Harry pointed out needlessly.

A flush brightened Neville’s face until it was the exact same shade of the armchair upon which he sat. “I spent a lot of time in the greenhouses last term. I like plants – they remind me of being at my Uncle Algie’s house. He owns a greenhouse in Bristol, and I went and visited him last summer before school started. That’s when I got Trevor; I found him in one of the plants, and Uncle Algie let me keep him. Anyway, Professor Sprout doesn’t mind if I come visit. She’s really nice.”

Harry agreed. “Do you still go there?” He asked curiously. “I haven’t noticed it.”

Neville’s face grew even redder, which Harry had not thought possible. “I haven’t needed to. I mean – we’ve been hanging out a lot.”

Harry’s stomach tightened when he realized how lonely Neville must have been. Now he thought of it, he realized that Neville had always been on the periphery of various friendships. In the boys’ dormitory, it had always been Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan, and Harry and Ron. Neville was the odd one out; the one without a best mate sleeping in a bed near him. It had not been until Dumbledore’s Army that he had made abiding friendships – the closest with Luna Lovegood, and later with Hannah Abbott.

“We’ll have to go down with you sometimes,” Harry said casually. “We could use a break from the other students.”

Hermione and Ron came down at the exact same moment. Harry wondered, not for the first time, if Ron had some sort of sixth sense when it came to Hermione’s whereabouts.

“Excuse me a moment, Neville,” Harry murmured. He strode over to them, bent his head, and told them – with a few minor adjustments – what had happened the previous evening in the Forbidden Forest.

“It’s Voldemort!” he finished. “That’s who’s trying to steal the Philosopher’s Stone!”

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Harry and Ron snuck out of the boys' dormitory without incident. Harry could not help but glance over at Neville's bed, wondering if he would try to stop them again. Neville had taken to disappearing for a few hours every other day or so. Harry was curious about it, but he figured that Neville was visiting the greenhouses and Professor Sprout again. Still, it had allowed him, Ron, and Hermione the chance to "discover" Hagrid's careless talk in the Hog's Head Inn. The crimson hangings, however, were closed, and Harry could not tell.

Hermione met them at the foot of the stairs, and Harry's heart immediately started pumping especially fast. This was the moment; it was time to rescue the Stone and pass the first hurdle in the journey toward Voldemort's eventual defeat.

"Have you got the cloak?" Hermione's hiss betrayed her nerves. It was much louder than her speaking voice.

"Yeah," Ron assured her.

"Let's go," Harry said.

"You three are going out again," Neville's voice. The pudgy boy peeked over the top of the armchair.

"Neville," Hermione said despairingly. "Listen, go back to bed! This is important."

"No," the boy flushed. "I-I-I know what you're up to."

Ron and Harry exchanged surprised looks.

"I heard Harry telling you after our detention," Neville set his jaw, and Harry saw, for the first time, the resemblance between the shy boy he was and the courageous man he would become. "I'm not deaf, I was sitting right there."

"Neville..."

"I want to come with you," he said stubbornly. "I want to help stop You-Know-Who. If you don't let me, I-I-I'll – "

"All right," Harry said firmly, before Neville could threaten to fight them. "It'll be a tight fit under the cloak, but I think it'll cover us. We need all the help we can get against Voldemort," he explained, mostly for Hermione's benefit. "Can we go now?"

They marched to the portrait hole, and Harry heard Hermione say "Are you sure, Neville? It will be very dangerous."

Neville didn't answer, but continued on. Once they were out, he threw the cloak over himself and the other three. It covered them, barely; Ron had to hunch down a little to keep their feet from showing, but they could manage.

"Listen," Harry said softly, for Neville's benefit. "Do you know what the Philosopher's Stone is?"

"Yeah," Neville said, just as quietly. Harry could barely hear him. "Ever since I – er – eavesdropped, I've been researching it in the library. We've got to stop him from getting it!"

"Well done, Neville," Hermione said.

"There's stuff guarding it. We only know one of 'em," Ron lied. "It's a three-headed dog – "

Harry cursed; it came out louder than he had expected. "I forgot the flute! *Damn* it."

"We can't go back now!" Hermione said in horror.

"Don't worry, we'll just sing," Ron said.

"Three-headed dog?" Neville said faintly. Harry had forgotten that this Neville had never encountered Fluffy before.

"Yeah, his name is Fluffy," Ron told him. "But you've just got to make music and he goes right to sleep."

“Which Hagrid told You-Know-Who,” Hermione explained. She paused while they tip-toed past Mrs. Norris. When she was about to continue, Harry gripped her arm, “Peeves,” he breathed.

Once he had tricked Peeves into thinking that he was the Bloody Baron off on secret business, he continued where Hermione left off, “We’re certain that Voldemort” – everyone flinched, even Ron – “is using a teacher.”

“Who?” Neville’s eyes were round with shock.

“I think it’s Snape,” Hermione said stubbornly.

“It isn’t Snape!” Ron said exasperatedly. “Look, Harry and I have spent loads of time with him in detention. He could’ve killed Harry at any time...”

“True,” Hermione said grudgingly.

“Me and Ron reckon Quirrell’s behind everything,” Harry said. They paused outside the door leading to the third-floor corridor where Fluffy, Professor Quirrell, and Voldemort awaited them.

“I think I agree with Hermione,” Neville said timidly. “Quirrell’s afraid of even more things than I am.”

Ron snorted. “You’re heading off to face You-Know-Who with three other first-years and you think you’re a coward or something?”

Hermione muffled a squeak. Apparently having it put that baldly stretched her nerves.

Harry told Neville about the lack of stuttering that he’d lied about over-hearing. “Listen, we can’t waste any more time; we’ve got to go.”

They stepped into the room with Fluffy. “Hi, Fluffy,” said Ron, and immediately began to sing a rather awful rendition of the Hogwarts song. After a moment’s pause – Harry’s singing voice was, if possible, even worse than Ron’s – Harry joined in. He used the tune of an old Muggle song. Hermione followed their lead, and then Neville did, his voice thin and shaking.

It worked; it probably worked even better than the last time. The monstrous dog flopped down, sighed deeply from all three mouths, and closed its six eyes. Harry moved forward, shoved an enormous paw off of the trapdoor, and opened it.

"Listen," he said, while the others kept singing. "I'll go down first... then Ron... then Neville, then you, Hermione." They nodded, and Harry jumped. Down and down he fell, landing with a thump on the Devil's Snare. Ron quickly followed, grinning. Harry answered it.

Neville screamed all the way down.

"Neville," Harry said urgently. "What's this plant thing? Ron and I can't move!"

Neville looked around, eyes narrowed. "It's Devil's Snare! It fears fire; oh *no*, I can't move my hand!"

Hermione landed beside them, looking frightened.

"Hermione! Make fire!" Neville shouted at her. "HURRY!"

Wand trembling in her grasp, she muttered the spell for the bluebell flames she knew so well. Within moments, they were free.

"Good thinking, Neville," Ron clapped him on the back.

"Yes," Hermione said shakily. "It's lucky you're here."

"C'mon," Harry said grimly. "We don't know what's up ahead," he lied.

They entered the room with the flying keys. Harry looked around for the one with the bent wing, grabbed the broom that rested up against the wall, and tore off after it. He followed it around and around the room, grimacing whenever he collided with a small, sharp object, and finally closed his fingers around it.

Hermione's and Neville's mouths were open in an 'O' and they stared at Harry as if they had never seen him before. "Wow, Harry, where'd you learn to fly like that?" Neville asked. "You should sign up for the Quidditch team!"

“Yeah, I’ll go do that right now,” Harry said sarcastically. “Ron’s been telling me that for months, but they don’t allow first years on the team, do they?”

“Harry and I did some flying at the Burrow over Christmas,” Ron explained, while Harry fitted the key in the lock, and opened the door that led to the unconscious troll.

“At least we don’t have to fight the troll,” Neville stared at it.

“Ron and Harry wouldn’t have a problem with it,” Hermione informed him. Ron beamed. The next room had the gigantic, moving chess set, and Harry was just as lost as before. Ron, however, was clearly in his element. He made all the calls, and Harry, Hermione, and Neville followed his orders, looking relieved. Not only that, but Ron managed not only to get them across the board in half the time, but he didn’t get himself hurt in the process.

“Good job, mate,” Harry said.

“Thanks,” Ron smiled, not at all modest, and led the way across the threshold of the last room.

It took Hermione four minutes to figure out the logic puzzle (Harry timed it). His anxiety grew steadily. This was it. Voldemort was in the next room. He glanced at Ron, who gave him a wordless look of reassurance. Neville looked green, though he held his head up. And then Harry looked at Hermione.

Her mouth moved soundlessly as she puzzled through Snape’s test. The black flames behind her flickered and gave the room an eerie glow. She looked up, triumphant, just as Harry pulled her away. For a moment, she had looked like she was on fire, the flames licking up her robes, lighting her bushy hair, and Harry could hear the echoes of her agonized screams...

“Harry! What are you doing?” She cried out. Harry had yanked her, hard, away from the flames that seemed even more ominous than they had the last time. She nearly fell, but she caught herself on Ron’s robes.

"I'm sorry," Harry muttered, panting. "I just thought... you looked like you were on fire..."

"Well, I'm not," she said testily. "But I've figured out which one will send us through... it's the little one on the end." She pointed.

Harry picked it up with fingers that still trembled. He could not look at Ron. "There's only enough for one," he said. His back still turned, he focused his attention on the Obfuscomency he had practiced nearly every day for months. It was as good as he could make it, and that would have to do.

"Listen," he said. "Go back up – use the brooms in the room with the keys. Send Hedwig to find Dumbledore."

"We can't let you go alone!" Neville said. "You-Know-Who is there!"

"Find Dumbledore," Harry said, and even he could hear the finality in his voice. "Tell him everything you know."

He tipped the last of the potion into his mouth, swallowed, and stepped through the flames.

Quirrell stood in front of the Mirror of Erised, his back turned, and that ridiculous purple turban still on his head. "Ah, Potter," he turned. "I wondered if I would meet you down here."

"I'm not going to let you have the Stone," Harry told him. Quirrell trained his wand on him. "And I expect you've run into a bit of a problem with Dumbledore's test, haven't you? You can't get the Stone, can you?"

"Not yet, but I will," Quirrell cackled. "And I will be rewarded beyond imagining... shared power and glory, more than I could ever dream..."

"If you get the Stone," Harry pointed out. "How long have you been down here?" He wiped his sweaty palms against his robes.

"*Use the boy,*" Voldemort hissed from behind the turban. Harry's scar burned, but he ignored it.

“Potter! Come here!”

Harry took his time. He did not know how long it would take Dumbledore – who was poised to meet Ron, Neville, and Hermione halfway to the Owlery – to get here. He’d barely survived the effort last time. *He’ll get here in time*, Harry told himself.

“Stand in front of the Mirror and tell me what you see,” Quirrell nudged him in the back. “Do it!”

“What, no ‘please’?” Harry muttered, earning himself a shove that sent him to his knees.

Quirrell gave the ‘there is no good and evil, only power’ speech again, evidently unable to help himself. Harry listened carefully, though it made him feel ill. *Voldemort is wrong about that, dead wrong*, he thought, grimly satisfied.

When Harry could stall no longer, he moved to stand before the Mirror. For a moment, it only gave him his reflection – short, skinny, and pale – before it changed. It *flickered*. It showed him with Ginny, his arm around her, smiling broadly; Ron and Hermione stood next to them. Harry looked closer and saw all the Weasleys, Hagrid, Neville, Luna, and many more familiar faces, all happy and alive, and all mouthing the words: “You did it!” Then it faded away, and he saw his parents and all his family. I’ve *still got that desire, then*, Harry thought a little wistfully. It too faded. He saw himself winking slyly and patting the pocket of his robes. He felt the Stone drop into his pocket.

“What did you see, Potter?”

Harry closed his eyes and very carefully rearranged his memories to fit the old timeline. He turned. “I saw myself, standing and holding the Quidditch Cup and the House Cup. I’ve just won both,” he lied.

He felt the faintest touch on his mind – Voldemort was truly an accomplished Legilimens, Snape felt like a battering ram – and countered it with Obfuscomency. Voldemort was only there for a moment, Harry was relieved to note. He had not suspected a thing, and left as soon as he saw that Harry had the Stone.

"He lies."

Harry ran for the stairs. One step, two steps, three steps, and a fourth and fifth; and he was almost halfway there before Quirrell caught him. He grabbed him by the hair, touching Harry's skin, and sealed his own fate in the process. They both looked down, almost fascinated and unable to look away, when Quirrell's hand started to smolder. It blackened and charred and turned to ash before Quirrell could move away.

Harry reached up and touched the man who had consented to let Voldemort share his soul. Quirrell screamed in agony and fright, and little black stars began to dance in front of Harry's eyes; still, Harry kept his hand on Quirrell's face, and reached to grab Quirrell's wand arm.

The man stopped screaming just before the darkness claimed Harry.

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Harry eased back into wakefulness slowly as though slipping into a warm bath. Harry waited several moments, collecting his thoughts, before attempting to open his eyes. His limbs felt heavy and his head muddled. He blinked, seeing only brightness and the blurry gold of Dumbledore's glasses.

"Voldemort?" Harry murmured.

"Fled," Dumbledore told him succinctly. "You almost died again."

"I know. But I knew I wouldn't."

"It was extremely close, for a terrible moment I thought you'd been killed."

"You said that last time," Harry replied.

"What if I'd been just a moment too slow?" Dumbledore asked. Harry wondered vaguely if the older wizard was angry with him. "What if your friends had not gotten to me as fast as they did?"

"I knew they wouldn't."

"Harry, the future isn't immutable, you have proven that. I noticed Mr. Longbottom was there as well – what if he had changed something?" Dumbledore sounded very weary. "Despite the fact that you've been here before, have done these things before, does not mean that things won't change."

"The reason why I'm here is to change things," Harry reminded him. "And I didn't know that you would arrive when you did or that my friends would be as fast as they were because I know the future, and how things turn out. I knew because I trusted you to get there in time, and I trusted them to run as fast as they could."

He was so *tired*. "How long have I been here?"

"Less than a day," said Dumbledore. There was a note in his voice that Harry could not define.

"I'm awake earlier than last time," Harry said. "Must be why I... can barely think. Or... keep my eyes open..."

"I suspect Madam Pomfrey will want to keep you for several days," Dumbledore said. "You've exhausted almost all of your energy."

"Not all of it," Harry pointed out. He sounded very weak and it was a little humiliating. He closed his eyes.

"Harry, I worry that... given the circumstances," Dumbledore began delicately.

For a moment, Harry was confused. *What circumstances?* But then he remembered. The Horcrux inside him and the Killing Curse, Voldemort and the death that likely lay in his future.

"I fear that you are taking risks with your life."

"M not, promise," Harry forced the words out. He felt like he was being smothered in cotton as soft as clouds, and he wanted to give in to the feeling. "Not worried... about that yet... Things I've got to do..."

"If you say so," Dumbledore sighed. Harry didn't know if the man believed him or not, but it was true for now. He didn't want to dwell on it. He had years and years...

"Professor, last time... Hagrid sent owls to get pictures of my parents... old school friends..."

"I will ensure that he does it again," said Dumbledore. "Regardless of your words, Harry, I am still worried. I did not like to see you so near to death as I did last night."

"You'll get used to it..." Harry's words were so slurred that he was not sure Dumbledore had understood them. Harry smiled a little, and let himself fade away, grateful – despite Dumbledore's concerns – to be alive.

Author's Note:

And here ends the first year. I hope it's been exciting enough for you guys – unfortunately, I've had to set the stage of the rest of the story. I've already got most of the details of everything hammered out, although I've left myself enough room for changing it up a bit if I fancy doing so. I'm glad to be getting started on the events that take place during Harry's second year; it'll have a lot more action than the first, I promise.

For those of you who are happy that Ron is involved in their adventures through time: I chose Ron because he so often isn't featured in re-do stories (I can't think of one), and because his older, more mature presence is required for the plot.

I hope you will forgive me for the liberties I have taken with spells and (more importantly) what happened when Harry and Dumbledore went to get the ring Horcrux. I thought up Obfuscomency when I a) decided that just because Harry is older and wiser does not necessarily mean that he is capable of it, and b) because I figured that Voldemort would find it odd that an eleven year old boy would know it. I also created the enchantment because it worked well for plot purposes, and also I thought it a bit believable. It explained why Dumbledore put on the ring despite the fact that he knew – as Harry had learned from the

fairy tale – that in order to use it, he had to turn it over three times in his hand.

One further explanation: unless otherwise stated, the events in the books generally pan out the same way in this story. I'm not out to write the books all over again.

I look forward to seeing you at the next update! Thanks to all those who reviewed.

Chapter 6 – The Not So Secret Diary

Harry awoke to the pattering of a gentle summer rain on the windows of Ron's attic room and the feel of Ginny's lips against his. Not fully awake, he fully enjoyed the sensation, thinking that he was having an especially wonderful dream. He kissed her back, and he felt her sigh softly against his lips. "Wake up, sleepyhead," she said.

He bolted upright, banging his head against hers. "Ow! Wha – Ginny!" Eyes wide, he looked over at the cage that held Scabbers (also known as Wormtail). He appeared to be sleeping, but who knew how often the traitorous bastard faked sleep in order to eavesdrop? Not daring to say anything, he just stared at her.

"It's all right, Harry," Ron said from the other bed. He sat cross-legged and looked fully alert.

"I dosed him with the Sleeping Draught Dad made for Mum the night after you two and the twins got back with the car," Ginny explained, smiling smugly. She threw a glare at the rat. "He's lucky I didn't give him the Draught of Living Death."

Harry flopped back down on his camp bed, nerves still jangling. "Sorry," he covered his eyes with his forearm. "I know you wouldn't give us away, I was just surprised." He eyed her. "Care to start over and wake me up again?" She laughed, and pecked him on the cheek.

"First I want to hear – did Dobby come to visit?" she asked.

Harry nodded, and grinned. "He did indeed. He warned me about the 'dire things to come' and then had his fun with the Dursleys. I wish I'd had a better sense of humor about it last time. Even more, I wish I'd had a camera to capture forever the look on Uncle Vernon's and Aunt Petunia's faces when they saw the cake go *spat!* all over the client's wife."

They all laughed appreciatively. Ginny curled up next to him on top of the covers, and he placed a hand in her hair, stroking it. Harry was in a very good mood. They had a bit of a break this summer, before they had to return to school and deal with the Horcrux waiting for

them. He intended to enjoy it as fully as he could. His encounter with Voldemort had been made public, and Dumbledore had assured him after the Leaving Feast that already suspicions amongst the staff (of which Harry had had no idea) had been laid to rest. Professor McGonagall had apparently been especially proud, though he had to trust the headmaster on that one, since she'd looked much the same as always. Gryffindor had managed to win the House Cup; and, best of all, Mrs. Weasley had treated him with all the warmth he remembered when he'd arrived at the Burrow four days previously.

"Mum has completely come around, I think," Ron informed him, apparently following Harry's train of thought. "She almost drove me nuts when I first got home, asking questions and clucking over me like one of the hens in our yard," Ron looked very pleased with this.

"And she was ever so worried about you after she heard what happened," Ginny told him, patting his knee. She paused, "what I want to know is how Neville got tangled up in this."

Harry told her. "So we let him; I couldn't say no, and I didn't even want to," he finished. "He was helpful, too – he figured out the Devil's Snare before Hermione would've."

"Good for Neville!" Ginny said.

"Did you know that he spent all of first term, and most of second – until the dragon – with Professor Sprout in the greenhouses?" Harry asked her. "You were closer to Neville, did he ever tell you that?"

"No, but it doesn't surprise me," replied Ginny. "I don't think he had very many friends before Dumbledore's Army."

Harry had had a thought of beginning the DA anew in the coming year during his incarceration at the Dursleys. Professor Lockhart was just as useless as Umbridge, after all, and Harry could use his experience with Voldemort to explain away what might be viewed as advanced paranoia. But he'd discarded the idea almost as soon as he'd had it. He was heading into some murky waters what with everyone going to be sure that he was the Heir of Slytherin. He didn't want to muddy it up even more by starting an army.

"Well, that's about to change," Ron said. "We'll introduce him to Luna. Explain to me again how she found out?"

Ginny opened her mouth to speak, but Harry spoke before she could. Thinking about suspicions reminded him of something. "Hold up, I almost forgot." He leaned over, trying not to dislodge Ginny, and rummaged around the open trunk next to him, and finally found an old issue of the *Daily Prophet*.

"Dumbledore gave this to me," Harry explained. "It's the article that Dumbledore, Snape, and your mum mentioned."

"You kept that quiet!" Ron accused.

"I forgot," Harry said honestly. "I really did, what with the dragon and the Stone and everything."

"Makes me wonder what else you've forgotten," Ron muttered. Guilt surged up inside Harry, but he forced it back down. Ron and Ginny, heads now bent over the slightly yellowed parchment, did not notice.

Ginny finished first, her face flushed with anger. "I want to *hex* the person who wrote this," she bit out. "He or she wrote this when you were only seven!"

"Barely, he was almost eight," Ron said, tapping the date on the cover. "It's dated the thirtieth of July."

"Do you honestly think that matters, Ron?" Ginny asked. "It's worse than what I expected. No wonder Mum was suspicious; she'd read this piece of rubbish! And who knows how many other people read it and took it to heart? If *Mum* reacted to it – and you know how soft-hearted she is – then you can bet that some people are already preparing for the day when you're the new Dark Lord."

Harry thought her reaction was a bit much, and was just about to tell her so when Ron spoke. "She's got a point, Harry. I don't know who wrote this, but whoever it was is not on our side."

"Dumbledore doesn't think it was a Death Eater," Harry told them. Then he thought about what Sirius' head had told him in the

Gryffindor common room about how good and evil was not necessarily divided between Death Eaters and non Death Eaters. He'd been talking about... "Umbridge. Do you think it might be Umbridge?"

Ron and Ginny looked stunned and then thoughtful. "I reckon that's a good idea," Ron said slowly. "I'd place my bet on it."

"I would too," said Ginny. "It makes sense."

"You know she'd do anything to discredit you," Ron added.

"But she hasn't met me yet... maybe she's trying to get a head start?" Harry asked. "She already sees me as a threat to her precious Ministry?"

"The Ministry has never wanted to believe that Voldemort would one day return. Dad said – last time, right before we left for Grimmauld Place – that Minister Fudge has always spoken of him as though he were dead, and refused to hear otherwise," Ginny said.

"Do you think he's in on it, too?" Ron asked.

"No, too subtle," said Ginny. "But I'll bet he was relieved when it happened. Umbridge probably did it to put him in a better position or something. Maybe she even told him after the fact, and that's why he trusted – will trust, damn, I'm getting my tenses confused – her."

"Oi!" Ron, who had been lounging, sat upright, and swung his legs off the bed. "Ginny, we forgot to tell him about the other article!"

"Another article?" Harry asked wearily.

"Yeah, it came right after I got here," Ron opened the drawer on his nightstand, revealing a very messy pile of parchment and old quills. "It's not... bad. Compared to some of the stuff that came out last time, it's almost nice."

Harry took the offered copy of yet another issue of the *Prophet*. His eyes widened when he saw the headline.

HARRY POTTER ALLEGEDLY MEETS YOU-KNOW-WHO AT HOGWARTS

“Allegedly?”

“Keep reading.”

In a statement last Friday night, Albus Dumbledore, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, 111, said that Harry Potter claims that he rescued a Philosopher’s Stone from falling into the hands of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. “Harry Potter has met sic He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. sic You-Know-Who had possessed Professor Quirrell, and had it not been for Harry’s timely reaction, would have once again restored himself to life.” The Stone, formerly owned by renowned alchemist Nicolas Flamel before it was destroyed, had been placed under Dumbledore’s protection after it was nearly stolen at Gringotts. It is undeniable that Harry Potter and three of his fellow first years (Donald Weasley, Ned Longbottom, and Hermione Granger, a muggle-born) did indeed meet a dark wizard who sought eternal life and unlimited wealth. Other sources allege that it was not in fact You-Know-Who (dead for ten years), but one Professor Quirrell, who taught Muggle Studies at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Harry Potter’s claim that he met You-Know-Who is undoubtedly due to the fact that he suffered extreme magical exhaustion which caused him to be in the hospital wing for several days. Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, said, “Oh, yes, Mr. Potter slept for days after he rescued that Stone from You-Know-Who. He nearly died.” While there have been rumors that You-Know-Who has not been defeated – Albus Dumbledore has always said that he would someday return – there is no conclusive evidence that this is true. It is very admirable that Mr. Potter, a first year, managed to stop a fully-grown wizard at all (although in his case there appears to be precedent). Yet it must be pointed out that the strain, and the magical exhaustion, may have led to the belief that Quirrell had been possessed by a wizard who is almost certainly dead.

Harry Potter himself was unavailable for comment, as he is enjoying his holiday at an undisclosed location.

"It could be a lot worse," Harry said objectively when he finished reading. "I could be an attention-seeking liar."

"That's what I thought too," Ron said. "Glad you're not mad. I'm a bit hacked off that they didn't get my name right. Fred and George didn't stop calling me 'Donald' for weeks."

"I'm not," said Harry, surprised by the truth. "Not this time. I think if this had come out when I really was eleven, I would've been. But we already know that they aren't going to believe me when he really does come back."

Ginny reached up and entwined her fingers with his. "They'll have to believe, in the end," she murmured.

"I know," he replied, a little note of sadness in his voice.

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Luna wandered into the kitchen of the Burrow the day before their trip to Diagon Alley looking as though it had happened quite by accident. Harry was the first to see her. If she knocked, Harry didn't hear it, and he had to duck underneath the table to hide his grin. She looked much the same as a child as she had in her older years: long, straggly blonde hair, bulging blue eyes, and a distinctly dotty air. She was shorter and smaller, but that was about it.

He nudged Ginny, who sat beside him picking tiredly at her breakfast. She blinked blearily at him, and he motioned to Luna with his head.

"Luna!" she cried, more awake than she had been moments previously. Ron nearly fell off his chair. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley did not react; presumably this had happened before.

"Hi, Ginny," said Luna. "I'm happy to see you again, I didn't know if you'd want me here since your brothers are home on holiday."

"Don't be silly, dear," Mrs. Weasley chided, already grabbing an extra plate and piling it high with eggs, sausage, bacon and toast. "We're always happy to have another girl in the house. *Especially* when all of the boys are home." She looked over at her sons; four was quite a lot,

even with Bill and Charlie missing. Ron and Harry were grinning, but the other boys were in various states of shock.

“Mum! We’re not dressed!” Harry did not think that he had ever seen George Weasley embarrassed. His face was flushed bright red, and his mouth slightly open. Harry couldn’t blame him. He and Fred had staggered into the room five minutes ago wearing boxers and nothing else.

“Serves you right,” Mrs. Weasley pointed at him. “I’ve told you a thousand times not to come down in your underwear, and you never listen!”

Luna watched with mild interest as Fred and George, who were speechless and several shades of red, scampered out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Ron and Percy laughed loudly, while Ginny covered her mouth to hide her snicker. “Daddy says that twins have spots on them from when they pricked each other with their nails before they were born. He was right.”

“I think they’re just freckles, dear, I’m afraid all of us Weasleys have got them,” Mrs. Weasley said with equanimity. Ron howled with mirth.

“Ginny... you were right...” He wiped his eyes, and stuck out his hand. “Hi, Luna, I’m Ron. And this is Harry.”

“I know,” Luna said, returning his handshake. “Ginny told me all about you. You’re the youngest, and you just finished your first year at Hogwarts, and you’ve got a long nose.”

“Uh, thanks,” Ron said. The twins, returning with more clothes on than was necessarily warranted for the warm summer day, were still so embarrassed that Luna had seen their bare chests that they did not even try to torment their younger brother.

Luna then looked at Harry, eyes traveling from his untidy hair to his scar. They lingered there for a while. “What does You-Know-Who look like?” she asked after a minute of silent staring.

Ginny and Ron snorted, and then there was dead silence. Harry felt uncomfortable as he realized that everyone in the room was staring

at him, waiting to hear his reply. “Uh,” he stalled, hoping that Mrs. Weasley would save him from answering this question. “Well... I dunno if I really know what he looks like” – he saw the snakelike face and the red eyes in his nightmares at least once a week – “Since he was stuck on the back of Quirrell’s head. His... nose was shaped funny, like slits.”

“You really met him then?” Fred spoke up. “When Quirrell was trying to get the Stone? You-Know-Who was what he was hiding under his turban?”

“Young man!” Mrs. Weasley flared up. “You are out of line!”

George was outraged on behalf of his brother. “You didn’t mind when Luna asked him!”

“Luna is not my son!”

George and Fred muttered mutinously together, but the conversation turned to lighter things. Luna ended up spending the day with them. They did not get a chance to speak to her about the time travel, but she did not let on by word or gesture that she knew. The twins, having gotten over their embarrassment and taken off one of their sweaters, suggested a game of Quidditch, which turned out to be several games, with Fred, Ron, and Luna on one team, and Ginny, Harry, and George on the other. By the time it was too dark to continue playing, George had told Harry thirty-one times that he ought to try out for the House team, and Fred had told him seventeen times (with increasing annoyance that Harry always caught the apple Mr. Weasley had charmed to make fly) that he would make a decent Seeker.

“Mum, can I walk Luna home?” Ginny asked after dinner.

Mrs. Weasley looked uncertain. “I don’t know if it’s safe, dear, your father and I thought we’d take her Side-Along Apparition again.”

“Luna walks over here all the time!” said Ginny.

“Not at night, just in the mornings,” Mr. Weasley replied. He and his wife exchanged a look that Harry took to mean that they did not

approve of such a young girl walking such a long way by herself at anytime of the day – they just couldn't prevent it from happening.

"What if Harry and I went with them?" Ron asked, his mouth full of treacle tart. "Then there'd be four of us."

"We could go too," Fred said, indicating himself and George.

"Absolutely not," Mrs. Weasley said. She had found their most recent owl order purchases in their room while they'd been playing Quidditch, and she had yelled at them for over an hour before dinner. "You're just lucky I'm letting the two of you go with us to Diagon Alley tomorrow. What do you think, Arthur?" she asked her husband.

Harry crossed his fingers under the table.

"I can't see the harm," Mr. Weasley said. "It's a pretty safe trip, especially if there are four of them. And we'll keep an eye on the clock."

"You three come straight home," she ordered. "Tell Mr. Lovegood that you're not to linger. We're getting up early tomorrow. And take a lantern."

"HA!" Ron shouted once they were out of earshot, and he punched the air in triumph. He grabbed a bemused Luna into a tight hug and spun her around, while Harry and Ginny looked on and laughed. "Luna, how did you know?"

"Yeah, Luna," Harry said. "I've been wondering since we got Ginny's letter."

"I dunno," she shrugged. "Ginny looks older than ten—"

"I'm eleven now," Ginny informed her.

"—And so do the two of you," Luna continued as if she had not been interrupted. "It's obvious," she cocked her head. "So if you're older than you look, then you must've come from the future."

"It's that simple?" Ron asked. "You see three people who look older than their age and you automatically assume that they're from the future?" Harry could tell that he was impressed.

"Daddy knows a lot about it, and I've read some of his books," she said tranquilly. "Do you know that the spell and potion you used came from Merlin? He traveled through time, too. Daddy reckons that he still is. We just don't know it because he knows how to disguise himself. 'Be kind to strangers, they may be Merlin' he says."

"How did you know about the Tears of Merlin? Did Ginny tell you?" Harry asked. He walked ahead a little, and pushed away some of the branches so that the girls did not walk into them.

"No, she guessed that, too," Ginny answered.

"It's the only way you could've done it," Luna said. "Other ways leave you with the same body."

"You know, Luna," Ron said seriously. "I think I appreciate you even more now. I'm beginning to suspect that some of your strange ideas were true after all."

Luna turned around and walked backward so she could see him. "I think you're Lancelot," she announced. "And Harry is Arthur, and Ginny is Guinevere. They were told that they were going to get a second chance, and I think you're it."

"The thing is, Luna," said Harry. "This already *is* our second chance."

"And wasn't Guinevere in love with both Arthur *and* Lancelot?" Ginny asked. "I'm not going to fall in love with Ron. Ew."

"Which is why things will work out this time," Luna smiled.

Harry could not help but think later, as he crawled into bed, that today had been the last day of the holidays no matter that they still had a week until September 1st. Tomorrow they would go to Diagon Alley and they would return home with a Horcrux. Already, his thoughts were turning to the darkness ahead, both this year and in the distant future he was trying his hardest to prevent. He suspected seeing

Luna had made the memories – dormant these few months – return again with a vengeance.

Harry stared down in shock at the small figure of Luna Lovegood, whom he'd thought had been in Azkaban for well over a year. He'd had to carry her out of Malfoy Manor while Ron carried an unconscious Hermione. The cellar had been dark, and the extent of her injuries unknown. She had spoken to them; she'd helped them find the nail, and had cut away the bindings herself. But now, Harry saw in the light of the full moon that Luna bled deeply from a hundred different cuts. He could not understand how she was breathing.

"BILL! FLEUR!" He shouted. He dropped Kreacher's hand. Ron had already run in with Hermione, who had been tortured with the Cruciatus Curse before Bellatrix had thrown her unconscious body down the stairs.

Luna's face was so pale that she looked translucent. Amazingly, she opened her eyes. "Spell... preventing me from escaping," she said weakly. "Did this... every night... or every week, can't remember. Healed me... cut me... healed me... cut me... can't stop the bleeding."

It took a second for what she was saying to penetrate his tired mind. He nearly dropped her. "Luna... they did this to you every night? And made it so if you escaped, you'd bleed to –" But he couldn't finish.

"Death," Luna whispered.

"No," Harry said forcefully. "No, you aren't going to die." It sounded like a lie even to his own ears.

But she did an hour later, lying on a bed in one of Bill and Fleur's spare bedrooms. Fleur could do nothing; she didn't know of nothing that might save her. Molly arrived, summoned by Patronus, and was just as helpless. If Harry had had one bit of hope that the Healers at St. Mungo's would not turn them over to Voldemort, he would have taken her there and damned the consequences. In the end, all any of them could do was hold her hand while the white sheets were stained scarlet with her fleeing life.

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Harry played with the small coin he had enchanted to connect to two others. The Protean Charm had been a difficult bit of magic, and it had taken several tries before Harry had done it right; and he did it several more times after that to make sure it was perfect. They weren't the same as the ones they had used to start an army underneath the Ministry's nose. Those had been spelled to change the date and time. This one was a little different. As soon as Ginny tapped hers with her wand and muttered – of course – *always and always*, Harry's and Ron's would vibrate and grow uncomfortably warm. Harry had been tempted to also make it so that a piercing whistle came from it, but he realized that he was being paranoid. When Ginny finished writing in the diary, she would repeat the words, and all coins would go back to normal.

Harry did not like this plan. He'd said so, many times. He'd been shouted down each time. It was Dumbledore's portrait who had convinced him that these things needed to play out. They needed the sword. And after what Harry and this Dumbledore had gone through to destroy the ring, he reluctantly agreed. That did not mean that Harry was not allowed to brood over the decision, as he had told Ron earlier that morning. Harry had gotten very little sleep the night before, and Ron had noticed.

Neither one of them are worried enough, Harry thought sourly.

"Get moving, mate," Ron broke into his thoughts. "Mum's in a fury – you're not even packed?" He gaped around the room, seeing Harry's things still strewn all over the place. "What've you been doing? You missed breakfast so you could pack!"

"It'll only take five seconds," Harry said irritably. And then he proved it, using the same spell that Dora Lupin had used when the Order of the Phoenix had sprung him from the Dursley prison.

"You could have done that and had time for breakfast," Ron told him. Together, they lugged Harry's trunk down the stairs.

“Better take that to the car, boys,” Mrs. Weasley stood beside the front door, hands on her hips. “We’re already late. GINEVRA MOLLY WEASLEY, GET DOWN HERE NOW!”

Harry and Ron obeyed, and Harry soon found that only Ron’s trunk was in the boot. Percy came out, dragging his and panting heavily. Ron and Harry ran over to help him. With a grateful sigh, Percy rubbed his back, and said “They’d better get out here, Mum’s in a state.”

It took them another half hour before they were on the highway; the twins had everything they’d forgotten, and Mrs. Weasley ranted in the front seat. “I told you to pack last night, obviously I should have checked to make sure of it,” she kept saying. “And Ginny, the first day of school is not the day to have a lie-in!”

“Sorry, Mum,” Ginny said. She sounded tired, as though she’d gotten as little sleep as Harry had. He stared at the back of her head. He’d have to ask her if she had any misgivings. If she did, they could put a halt to this right now. They’d figure out how to get Gryffindor’s Sword some other way.

Harry occupied himself with these thoughts the rest of the way, only breaking out of his reverie when Harry and Ron were alone, staring at the barrier that led to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$.

Ron looked at it. “Do you reckon we should even try it?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. He smiled for the first time that day. “I don’t think we should crash headlong into it again, if that’s what you’re asking,” he proved this by placing his hand against it. “Yeah, it’s definitely solid.”

“Let’s go to the car and wait for Mum and Dad, then,” Ron said.

They hurried through the station, rushing passed staring Muggles, out the doors, and into the sunlight that seemed especially bright after the shadowy station.

“I have something to say to you,” Ron said, after they had reloaded the trunks in the boot, and put Scabbers and Hedwig in the backseat.

"*Muffliato*," he waved his wand. "Before Mum and Dad get here. You've got to stop brooding about things."

"Yeah? Well, I wish you'd worry a little more!" Harry said at once, frustration bubbling up inside him. "We're *letting* him – "

"I know what we're letting him do," Ron said. "Remember control. Isn't that what you told me when I was worried about Hermione and the troll?"

"It isn't the same."

"No, it isn't," Ron admitted. "Don't you think I'm worried too? But I *trust* you, Harry. Listen, even though I knew that things would work out the way they did last year, what you did was still pretty damn risky. Everything we're about is risky. But Ginny knows what she's doing, and so do you. And trust me, Harry, you ought to worry about yourself."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked blankly.

Ron laughed shortly and rumped his hair. "Talk about having to point out the obvious, Harry. How many times are you going to have to escape Voldemort?"

"But that's different, that's me –"

Ron gaped at him. "Are you mental? If you think that Ginny wasn't going spare with worry about you last year with the Stone, you're mad. She loves you just as much as you love her. The difference is that she trusts you."

Harry sagged against the car. "I do trust her," he said in a low voice. "But what if I'm not fast enough? What if everything goes sideways?"

Ron shook his head firmly. "It's not going to. You saved her when she was just my little sister to you. You'll die before you let anything happen to her. You're the only one who doesn't know that. Pull it together."

Harry mulled that over in his mind, trying to find an argument. Ginny was well aware of the risks. She was the one who had spent four months fighting about this, and Harry had – with the help of the portrait – finally decided that she was right. It was difficult to hold on to that resolution in the here and now. He hated the idea of placing her in danger. But realization slowly dawned on him that he was being awfully patronizing. Harry needed her at his side fighting; it wasn't fair to her to want to lock her up somewhere safe. The woman he loved would never stand for it, and if he loved her he would trust her. And himself.

"You're right," he said reluctantly.

"Merlin's pants, that took long enough," Ron blew out a deep breath. "You're lucky you agreed. Ginny planned to hex you tonight if you hadn't. And she wasn't going to be nice about it."

"Thanks, Ron," and Harry did not mean that he was thankful for being saved from something painful.

"No problem, mate," Ron said easily. He gazed at the car with longing clear upon his face. "Are you sure we can't do it again?"

"No," Harry said forlornly. "We've got to talk to Dumbledore and Snape before the rest of the students arrive..." Despite the fact that it had been a great deal of fun, stealing the flying car was more trouble than they could afford.

"WHAT ARE YOU TWO DOING OUT HERE?!" Mrs. Weasley shrieked.

Harry turned to her with a sigh.

As Ron explained the solid barrier to his incredulous parents, Harry, despite his more positive outlook of the last few minutes, could not help but feel that he had forgotten something very important.

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“Yes, we’re sure,” Ginny said firmly. “We have *got* to get Gryffindor’s Sword,” she explained. “You don’t have any idea how much we need it.”

“If Fiendfyre can be used to destroy the Horcruxes – “ Snape began, but Ron cut him off.

“Can *you* control it?” He asked. “Dumbledore here is the only one who can make it come and go as he pleases.”

“And even then it takes quite a bit of control,” Dumbledore nodded. “It will destroy Horcruxes, but if they find themselves needing to destroy it alone – for example, when they break into Gringotts – they will need the Sword. Unleashing Fiendfyre is remarkably dangerous; yes, Severus, even for me.”

“I wouldn’t unleash Fiendfyre if someone paid me a million galleons,” Ron said. “We’ve seen too much of the destruction it brings. Even at the hands of our allies.”

They all turned to stare at the diary Ginny held in one hand.

“You look unhappy about this, Potter,” Snape observed.

“I am unhappy,” Harry said quietly. “But,” he met Ginny’s eyes, “we desperately need that sword. Not just for the cup. I’m thinking about the snake, Nagini. And this is the only sure-fire way I know to get the sword.”

“You said that Neville Longbottom – loathe as I am to believe it – also acquired the sword after you thought it lost in the hands of a goblin,” Snape pointed out.

“He did,” Harry agreed. “But I think that the sword only comes when you’re in mortal danger. You’ve got to need it badly enough. You just saw it – we all put the Hat on and asked for help. No sword.”

Snape’s lips twisted, and glared at the offending object. They all knew that whatever the Hat had said when he had placed it on his head had annoyed him a great deal. “I should have known that Godric Gryffindor had a vile sense of humor.”

"To be perfectly honest, Severus," said Dumbledore, eyes twinkling. "I don't believe that Gryffindor placed the enchantments as he did merely to vex us."

"Be that as it may, Slytherin would never have required this of those that came after him," Snape said.

"No," Ron said slowly, as though speaking to a small child. "He just left a Basilisk in the school, hoping to get rid of all the muggle-borns."

"Use that insolent tone with me again, Weasley, and you'll find yourself with a month of real detention," Snape threatened. "Though I do see your point," he added grudgingly.

"Professor," Ginny piped up after a long moment of silence. "Will you check my Obfuscomency shields? Ron taught me how to do it, and I've been working on it all summer, but I don't know if I'm doing it right at all."

Snape consented. Dumbledore, Harry, and Ron watched closely as Snape and Ginny stared at one another. "It is a good effort," Snape finally said. "But, as Potter and Weasley know, the true Obfuscomency shield will be a complete spiral. Your true memories and that which you want to keep hidden are still reachable. Keep working on it, and I will..." he took a moment to think. "I will check it every Friday during your Potions class. If I think you need more help, I'm sure I can arrange to place you in detention."

Ginny grimaced. "I'll work on it every night. I don't think I've got time to be in detention."

Chapter 7 – The DA, Revisited

Dear Tom,

I'm so alone here at Hogwarts. No one understands how hard it is to be the last of so many, and I don't think I can compete. Bill was Head Boy, Charlie was Prefect, Percy's on his way to being Head Boy, and the twins are aren't afraid of anything, and will play pranks on anyone. And Ron... he's best friends with the Harry Potter. They saved the Philosopher's Stone from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named last year. I'm the only girl, and I don't think I'm good enough...

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"You heard a voice?" Hermione said, confused. "Coming from the walls?"

"Yes," Harry whispered. They were in the library together, finishing up the essays Professor McGonagall had assigned. "Ron reckons I didn't hear anything, but I know I did."

"Where is Ron, anyway?" she asked.

"Detention," Harry said dismissively. "Listen, it was really creepy. It said 'kill, tear, kill' in this odd voice."

"I think I know what it was, then," Hermione said. Harry thought for a hopeful moment that she had figured out that a Basilisk was crawling through the walls waiting to kill a muggle-born with a single look. But her expression was far too smug.

"What?" Harry asked warily.

"Peeves," she answered. "You know how he likes to trick students. I'll bet he'd think it was a laugh."

"It wasn't Peeves!" said Harry. "We'd just seen Peeves writing naughty words on the blackboard in an empty classroom."

“Another ghost, then,” Hermione said. Her quill quivered while she wrote speedily. Harry let her work in silence and stared around the library. For the first time in a while, he let himself remember the Hogwarts-that-was. Hannah Abbott sat with Ernie McMillan and several other second year Hufflepuffs. She looked very young with her short blonde hair done up in pig-tails. Harry wondered vaguely if he ought to be pushing her and Neville together, but decided that he had come back in time to defeat Voldemort without such a dreadful cost, and not to play matchmaker.

It had been a shock when Neville had announced that he was marrying Hannah; none of them had even known they were dating. But after the members of Dumbledore’s Army, who had spent months of their last year hiding out in the Room of Requirement, had been liberated, several of them had taken up residence in the home Hannah had shared with her dead mother. Neville had eventually moved from a spare bedroom into Hannah’s room, and they’d been married even before Ron and Hermione had. After watching the two of them at their wedding, Harry had been surprised that no one had seen it before.

It was a small wedding in a backyard protected by the Fidelius Charm. Hannah’s gentle face was aglow with happiness and streaked with tears as she stood before Neville and promised to love and cherish him. Neville beamed proudly; Harry was relieved to see that the scars inflicted by the Carrows were fading.

Harry stood and watched them. When Neville had asked him and Ron to stand up for them, Harry had been unsure. Not because he thought that they shouldn’t get married – after spending time with them together, it had been plain to see that they loved each other very much – but he’d worried that his presence and status as Undesirable Number One would cause undue danger. But, as Ginny had rightfully pointed out, the Death Eaters could not penetrate the secret. Not with Neville as Secret-Keeper.

Thinking of Ginny, he turned to look at her, winking. She smiled up at him from where she sat with her mother and Hermione. All three had tears streaming down their faces. Girls and weddings, he thought,

shaking his head. But Harry could not pretend that his throat wasn't a little tight.

"Until the day I die..."

"What are you smiling about?" Hermione asked suspiciously. "You've been staring at those Hufflepuffs."

"I'm not!" said Harry. "I wasn't smiling. I was thinking about the bloody voice I heard in the walls."

"Was it saying something funny this time? Because you were definitely smiling," said Hermione. "You can't be too worried about it."

"Ginny believes me," he said stoutly.

"Where is Ginny, anyway?" Hermione asked.

"I think she and Luna wanted to go to the Quidditch match," said Harry. He could not help glancing forlornly in the direction of the Quidditch pitch. It wasn't Gryffindor playing, but Slytherin against Ravenclaw. Still, though, he wished he could fly again, and leave his worries behind him as he soared through the clouds.

Hermione clicked her tongue. When Harry looked at her questioningly, Hermione grimaced and said, "Luna is just so... odd. She calls Ginny 'Guinevere' and makes up all sorts of nonexistent animals. I think her father is the editor of the *Quibbler* – that's a rubbish magazine, you know. The more bizarre and impossible it is, the more it gets attention! I tried reading one of the issues Luna lent me, but I couldn't even get through one article."

"I like Luna," said Harry. He thought Hermione was being a bit unfair. Ever since Ron had introduced them at the feast over a month ago, he'd noticed that Hermione was a bit sharp with her. Luna, ever serene, did not seem to notice. But Harry remembered Hermione's broken promises to Luna as she bled out at Shell Cottage.

"You can't die, Luna," she whispered, her voice still hoarse from screaming. "We've got to go hunting Crumple-Horned Snorkacks. I've... I've been doing some research, and I... I'm pretty sure we can

find them in Finland... Between the two of us, we'll find them, we will. But we can't if you die...

"You don't believe in them," Luna said. Her voice was fading away and so was she. Still, she smiled that familiar, dreamy smile.

"Yes, I do," Hermione sobbed. "I really, really do. I promise. We're going, just as soon as you get better..."

"Now you look worried," Hermione said. "Honestly, Harry, if this is really bothering you, maybe you should go see Madam Pomfrey."

"Nah," Harry shrugged. He figured he'd given it enough of a try. Maybe once the Chamber of Secrets was opened again, she'd figure it out straight away. He was about to bend his head again to the essay, when he felt heat coming from his pocket, vibrating against his leg. Ginny. "Listen, we've done enough on this thing for the day. Let's go back to the common room and see if anyone knows who won the match."

Filled with a nervous sort of energy, he hopped from foot to foot while Hermione reluctantly put her books away. *Ginny is writing in the diary right now*, he thought. He needed to at least be in the common room, like he was last time. She'd come down the stairs like a sleep-walker. She hadn't noticed him or Ron, and Harry'd had to fight the urge to knock her over. But instead, he'd just sat there, letting her walk alone into the Chamber.

"What has gotten into you today?" Hermione asked, once they'd left the library. "You've been acting strange. First the voice, then the weird smile..."

"I just want to know who won the match," Harry lied. "I reckon it's over."

Hermione did not push it, for which he was grateful. Instead, she chattered, and he pretended to pay attention to her. *Why is she walking so slowly?*

“Oh, damn,” he heard from behind him. He was up almost an entire flight of stairs, and her heavy book bag was torn. He hadn’t even noticed when she’d stopped.

“All my quills broke!”

All Harry wanted to do at the moment was to march straight up to Gryffindor Tower and make sure that Ginny was all right. He didn’t think she’d be possessed, not today, but until he felt the heat recede, he didn’t know for sure.

Sighing, he turned around. He ought to at least help Hermione... maybe that would make her move faster.

There was no warning at all. He felt a punch to his back that felt like it might’ve broken his spine. He had no time to even try to catch himself as he tumbled down the staircase. He was trying to focus on breathing through the pain like fire in his back. He could hear Hermione screaming, like she had at Malfoy Manor... He wanted to tell her to stop...

Damn it, Dobby, was his last thought before he heard a CRACK! and a violent sun exploded behind his eyes, leaving nothing but darkness.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Dear Tom,

Harry Potter is so brave. He was so dreadfully hurt in an attack, but he’s still alive, and still fighting. Ron reckons that he’ll be all right, but I’ve seen him in the Hospital Wing, and he looks like he’s almost dead. But that can’t be! He’s the Boy Who Lived! He defeated You-Know-Who when he was only a baby. I think my heart would break if he died. Even though he doesn’t seem to know that I exist.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

The first thing Harry felt upon waking was dreadful thirst. He felt as though his mouth had been stuffed with cotton that had been sun-dried in the Sahara Desert. He wanted to lick his lips, but his tongue

was too swollen to move. *Water*, he thought desperately. Then he tried to say it, but it came out like a croak.

"Arthur's awake!" Luna's voice.

Hermione screamed, and someone dropped something heavy. It clattered when it fell, and Harry desperately hoped that it was not a bed pan.

"Sorry!" said Neville. "Hermione scared me..."

"He doesn't look awake," said Ron.

Harry blinked. "Ahhh," he said, when he'd tried to say 'get me water.'

Someone mercifully understood him and shoved a straw in his mouth. Upon feeling the cool water slide down his throat, Harry immediately began to feel better. "Thanks," he murmured.

"Always," Ginny whispered, so no one else could hear.

"How long?" he asked.

"Over two weeks, Harry," Neville said. "Madam Pomfrey said that if you didn't wake up soon, you'd have to go to St. Mungo's."

Hermione started sobbing. "Don't," he told her.

"I thought you were *dead*," she cried into her hands. "I did, I really did. And all I could do was just stand there. I c-c-couldn't think of anything to do!"

He looked in her direction, but all he could see was a blur of brown that might be her bushy hair. "Glasses," he said. Ginny gently put them on his face. "Hermione, you couldn't have done anything."

"Yes, I could! I know that Cushioning Charm. Professor Flitwick mentioned it in class last month, and I practiced it, but I didn't even think of it!"

"Hermione," Ron said soothingly. "We talked about this, remember? It isn't your fault. You know it isn't. You agreed that it wasn't."

“What happened, Harry?” Neville asked.

Over the top of Hermione’s head, Ron mouthed “Dobby?” and Harry gave a quick nod. “I dunno,” he said. “I felt like someone punched me in the back – “

“Whoever it was cracked your spine,” Luna said helpfully. “You broke lots of bones.”

“ – and then I fell... I think I hit my head...” Harry finished. “My spine was cracked?”

“You cracked your spine, broke your arm, and fractured your skull,” Ginny’s voice shook. “You’re lucky Hermione got a teacher as quickly as she did.”

“Thanks, Hermione,” he said.

“Harry,” Neville said in a hushed voice. “We reckon that your attack had something to do with that voice you heard.”

“And if I’d just *listened* to you,” Hermione hiccupped. “Maybe it wouldn’t have happened!”

“Hermione,” Harry said firmly, despite the one giant ache that was his head. “It wasn’t your fault. Tell me about this theory of yours.”

She did, shakily. Harry learned that while he’d been sleeping, his friends had frantically tried to figure out what had happened and who had been behind the attack. And they were sure it was an attack, because Hermione had seen the flash of light, and Madam Pomfrey had confirmed it. The fall had not cracked his spine; the Stunning Spell (or something similar) that Dobby had used had done that. Ron and Ginny had apparently thrown themselves at the mystery with as much vigor as Hermione and Neville. Luna appeared to be only vaguely interested.

The theories as to who had been behind the attack were many and varied. Neville, voice shaking, suggested You-Know-Who wanted revenge for his foiled plans. Luna suggested a rogue Rickycloyer (much to Hermione’s annoyance). Hermione herself thought that it

had been someone under an invisibility cloak, because she hadn't seen anyone and no one could Apparate or Disapparate inside Hogwarts. Harry suspected that Ron and Ginny had figured out the same thing he had: Dobby, unable to curse his broom, had tried a more direct approach.

It was not until Madam Pomfrey, returning from an errand, realized that Harry was awake and kicked his friends out of the Hospital Wing, that the speculation ended.

"You need to be more careful," she admonished him.

"I will," Harry lied.

He spent the next few days slowly recovering. As his injuries healed, his boredom grew. He took to tormenting himself with his worries to alleviate it. *Last time, all I had was a broken arm, and it wouldn't have been a big deal, but Lockhart tried to heal it,* he told himself again and again. *But this time, I got hurt a lot worse. What if everything we try to change is going to turn out like this?*

He asked Ginny and Ron that one night when they'd snuck out of the tower using his invisibility cloak.

"That's just Dobby," Ron said. "He's a nutter."

"The whole reason why we came back was to change things," Ginny pointed out. "Stop thinking about it for now, Halloween is coming up..."

Harry was surprised to realize that Halloween was less than a week away. Instead of focusing all his energy on worrying about things that may or may not happen, he decided to focus it on getting out of there before the Chamber of Secrets was opened. Ginny needed him to be alert, not brooding over the choices that they had made long ago.

He did spare a moment to laugh at himself. When Dumbledore had first suggested the Tears of Merlin, he'd thought that they could change everything. He'd planned to destroy the diary as soon as it fell into their hands, to free Sirius the day they got back, and to prevent everything from happening as it had. But as soon as he had voiced

these thoughts, jubilant though they were, the other Dumbledore had wisely pointed out that he was being a fool. Not that he'd said it in so many words, but his reasonable tone had made Harry feel all the more stupid. They couldn't change too much, not if they wanted to keep the upper hand. The Sword was of vast importance, and so too was ensuring that it was Wormtail that took the steps needed for Voldemort's resurrection. The devil they knew was better than the devil they didn't.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Dear Tom,

Harry is all right! He's been released from the Hospital Wing and everything. Even though Madam Pomfrey said that he might have to move to St. Mungo's, he woke up. We were all very happy. And I'm happy. Except, Tom, there've been attacks against the school. A cat was hurt, and I woke up the next day with blood on my robes. I think it might have been me... I don't remember going down to the Halloween Feast, and everything is a complete blank. I don't know what to think, Tom, I'm scared!

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry held his wand loosely at his side, and stared at Draco Malfoy. The tension in Harry's belly did not come from facing Malfoy in a duel. Harry, with his added knowledge of spells and lots of practice, did not think that Malfoy really stood a chance. He tried not to let that thought make him feel smug, but still. The tension came from the fact that he was about to reveal himself as a Parselmouth to the entire school. He could almost hear them accusing him of being the Heir of Slytherin.

The sneaky git is going to do it, Harry thought. He'd made Draco angry by dodging all his spells, and flooring him with *Rictumsempra*. Harry didn't look at the crowd, but he knew that the loud laughter came from Ron.

"I wouldn't smile, *Potter*," Malfoy snapped.

Harry deliberately yawned. "What're you going to do, *Malfoy*? Try to hit me with a spell? You'll have to work on your aim."

The Gryffindors laughed.

“Remember, boys,” Lockhart said. Harry repressed the urge to attack him; Lockhart grated on his nerves. “Disarm only, this time.”

Harry bowed, not taking his eyes off Malfoy for even a second.

“Serpensortia!”

Harry grimaced slightly. He’d been hoping that things would happen a bit differently, although it had been a small hope. Malfoy had never been anything but predictable. He sighed. *Here we go.*

“*Stop,*” Harry commanded. The snake, which had been blinking in confusion, did so. It lay placidly, staring at Harry. Harry was struck with an idea. In for a knut, in for a galleon. If everyone was going to think he was the Heir of Slytherin, he might as well have some fun with Malfoy. “*Go back to the one who summoned you,*” he said. Then added, “*Don’t attack him. Don’t bite him. Just scare him a little.*”

And then he watched as the copper-head slithered back to Malfoy, entwined around his suddenly shaking legs, and licked its forked tongue. Malfoy screamed and stumbled backward. The entire hall was in silence, all were watching, riveted, as the snake followed. It appeared to be enjoying itself. Snape, looking shaken, finally Vanished it. Malfoy ran back to Crabbe and Goyle, all dignity apparently forgotten.

The whispers broke out immediately. Harry shrugged them off, and turned to his friends. Neville was pale with shock, as was Hermione. Luna was staring at something else in the room entirely; Harry was not even sure that she’d noticed that he’d spoken Parseltongue. Ginny and Ron, however, were trying so hard not to laugh that they looked as though they had gas. They converged on him (even Luna wandered over so that she stood near him), and, surrounding him, marched out of the Hall.

“You’re a Parselmouth!” Hermione whispered once they’d reached the Gryffindor common room. Luna had followed them through the portrait hole despite the fact that she was a Ravenclaw.

"You can talk to snakes!" Neville said in a shocked voice.

"Well, yeah," Harry said. "I set a snake on my cousin Dudley once."

Ron laughed. "I'll bet he liked that."

"It isn't funny, Ron," Hermione said loudly. "Now the whole school is going to think he's the Heir of Slytherin."

"Everyone knows that Slytherin could talk to snakes, too," Neville said.

"Harry isn't the Heir of Slytherin, though," Ginny pointed out.

"Besides," Ron said comfortably. "The snake didn't go after any muggle-borns or anything like that. It went after Malfoy, the biggest ponce and pureblood there is."

"I didn't set it after Malfoy," Harry lied. "I just told it to go back to the one who summoned it."

"That's what you said to it!" Neville said. "It looked like you were telling it to attack Malfoy."

"But it didn't attack Malfoy, it just went up to him, and didn't do anything even when Malfoy kicked it," said Ginny.

"It doesn't really matter what it did or didn't do," Hermione said stubbornly. "Everyone knows that the Heir of Slytherin is the only one who can open the Chamber of Secrets."

Harry very carefully did not look at Ginny. He could only imagine how she felt. It had begun again, just as they had intended. On Halloween night, Mrs. Norris had been petrified, and the warning had been painted on the wall. He'd sat in the common room, waiting for her to return. He wished that he could have followed her under the invisibility cloak, to make sure that he was with her every step of the way, but Dumbledore had put his foot down. It was an unnecessary risk, he'd argued, and Harry had reluctantly agreed. So he'd been there when she'd left, and he'd been waiting for her when she came back.

"Who do you think it is?" Neville asked. He lowered his voice, despite the fact that they were quite alone. "D'you think it might be Malfoy?"

"Nah," Ron shook his head. "That git hasn't got the brains."

"I think Professor McGonagall's the Heir of Slytherin," said Luna.

"Only because she's the least likely person it could be," Hermione said waspishly. "The only people we're sure it isn't are us, the professors, and Malfoy. I agree with Ron," she said stubbornly when Neville opened his mouth, "I'm sure it isn't Malfoy. I suppose it's one of the older students..."

"It could be You-Know-Who," Luna said vaguely.

Harry looked at her, startled. Had Ginny told her?

"She has a point," Hermione said begrudgingly. "You-Know-Who might be possessing another teacher. Or a student."

"If that's the case, it could be anyone," Ron said. Harry saw his eyes flicker to Ginny, but he didn't think anyone else noticed.

"We've got to figure out who it is," Hermione said urgently. "Otherwise people are going to suspect Harry! And maybe whatever Petrified Mrs. Norris will attack a student next time."

Harry looked at her. Then he turned away, wondering what might change because of the words that would come out of his mouth in a few moments. *It can only be for the better*, he told himself. "I think we ought to keep working on this," he said. "But... Hermione, do you know of any good spells?"

She looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," he gestured toward the door. "Spells that will work in duels. Like that body-bind curse or whatever."

"Well," she said slowly. "I think I know a few. But why?"

Harry shrugged. Then, not wanting to downplay the importance, he said seriously, "I think we should practice them. Especially if it is really You-Know-Who again."

"That's a good idea, Harry," Ron said. His eyes gleamed. He too had wanted to begin Dumbledore's Army again, earlier than last time. Ginny was grinning, and Luna, beside her, looked interested.

"You mean we should duel each other?" Hermione asked, perplexed. "But won't we be doing that at the Dueling Club?"

Ron snorted. "With that ponce? He's got moth balls where most of us keep our brains."

"We could... I dunno, find useful spells in books," Ginny said. "And learn them until we've got them down."

"I'm useless with spells," Neville said hopelessly.

"No, you aren't!" Ron, Harry, and Ginny said so loudly that Neville shrunk back. "I'm sure you'll be just fine," Ginny said in a quieter voice.

"But..." Hermione still looked so confused that Harry wondered if he had made a mistake in bringing it up. She might not be ready...

"Listen, Hermione," Ron said forcefully. "Think... what if Luna's right? What if You-Know-Who is behind all this stuff? We've got to do something. Lockhart certainly isn't teaching us anything useful. Don't look at me like that, you know he isn't. We've got to learn how to protect ourselves!"

Harry nearly applauded. "Exactly what I was thinking, mate."

"I suppose... there are books in the library that have really advanced spells that we won't learn until at least our fourth year," Hermione said after a long moment. "I could make a list, and we could try to learn them..."

"Brilliant," Ginny beamed. "I'll help."

“There’s no guarantee we’ll actually be able to learn them, though,” Hermione said, still doubtful. “But I do think Ron’s right. We’ve got to try, just in case...”

“What of you, Neville?” Harry asked.

“I still don’t think I’ll be any good, but I’ll try.”

“I think you might surprise yourself,” Harry said.

Harry felt so good at restarting Dumbledore’s Army – albeit with far fewer members – that he found himself almost impervious to the gossip that surrounded him and followed him wherever he went. Even though Harry was dead certain that people were talking about him, he did not let it bother him. Some of it, he knew, was the result of being a man grown, in mind if not in body. But a lot of it was the fact that despite Hermione’s initial misgivings, she had thrown herself into the task of finding appropriate spells with the same fervor she did trying to find a clue about who was opening the Chamber.

Ron and Ginny were, if anything, even happier than he was.

“Excellent, mate,” Ron said, punching the air. “I think it’s brilliant.”

“And wonderful of Luna to give us such a nice opening!” Ginny crowed. She sat on the floor, leaning against Harry’s legs. “If we can keep it going, they’ll be more prepared for what’s to come.”

“Speaking of Luna,” Harry grinned. “Are you certain you didn’t tell her?”

“Of course not,” Ginny said immediately. “She doesn’t know about the Basilisk or the diary. Or Dumbledore’s Army. All she really knows is that we’re from the future.”

“Who knows what Luna knows,” Ron said wisely.

“I wish she would stop calling me ‘Arthur,’” Harry said.

“I wish she would stop calling Ron ‘Lancelot,’” Ginny said wryly. “That’s just disgusting.”

“Things are going well,” Ron observed. “We’ve started the D.A. again, we’ve done well with keeping the students away from the Basilisk, and Christmas is almost here.”

“Yes,” Ginny agreed. “Brilliant idea with the coins, Harry. I know I’ve said that before, but I don’t think I could bear it if any of the students got hurt. It’s a huge weight off my mind.”

“Agreed,” Harry said, rubbing her shoulders. “Although spending the evening with Colin after the Gryffindor match was a bit weird. I’d forgotten how much he practically worships me at this stage.”

“You didn’t really need to,” Ginny said. “The only reason why he was out so late last time was because he was trying to visit you in the Hospital Wing.”

Harry shrugged. “I just wanted to be safe. He was decent company, I guess. His constant questions kept me from brooding while you were gone.” Harry supposed it was true. He’d cornered Colin a few weeks previously, and had asked if he’d wanted to play Exploding Snap. Colin, quivering with excitement, had stammered out an agreement.

“And if we’re right,” Ginny said. “We won’t even need to do anything about Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hermione, or Penelope Clearwater.”

“True,” Harry said. “I am so ready for Christmas,” he leaned his head back.

“Me too,” Ron grinned. “More than ready.”

“It’ll be the highlight of my year,” Harry said. “Since setting the snake on Malfoy already happened. You saw him, right? I thought he was going to wet his pants.”

“I thought I was going to hurt something, it took that much effort not to laugh,” Ginny laughed. “The look on his face was priceless. The slimy git. Tries to set a poisonous snake on the school, it just serves him right, honestly.”

“How’s Hermione coming with the research?” Ron asked.

“She’s doing all right,” Ginny said. “She’s found loads of useful spells, but she keeps saying that they’re too complicated for people our age.”

“I’ve figured out a way around that,” Harry said. “I’ve ordered that set of books Remus and Sirius got me for Christmas during our fifth year. We’ll all ‘practice’ them over Christmas, and show her that we can do it.”

“Good idea, Harry,” Ron said approvingly. “She won’t rest until she’ll be able to do them too, just because we can.”

“She’s already trying to figure out where we’re going to do this,” Ginny said. “She’s already figured out that this should be kept a secret. But once she comes back from the holidays, we’ll have discovered this place.”

“Just think,” Harry said. “Once Christmas and the Chamber are over with, we’ll have an entire year without worrying about someone trying to kill us.”

HPHPHPHPHPHPHP

HARRY POTTER A PARSELMOUTH!

By Marigold Piper

Lucius Malfoy revealed yesterday that his son, Draco Malfoy, a second year Slytherin, was attacked by a snake at the bidding of Harry Potter. This is only the most recent in a series of disturbing events that have taken place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Eyewitness accounts claim that on Halloween night, a message appeared on one of the walls, stating that the Chamber of Secrets has been opened once more. For a more detailed account of the first time it opened (at the hand of the now gamekeeper, Rubeus Hagrid), turn to page four. For a reminder of the myths and legends surrounding the Chamber, also turn to page four. While most were under the impression that this was a prank perpetrated by one of the students, as no one has been harmed, the caretaker at Hogwarts believes otherwise. Argus Filch, a Squib, told me that his cat had

been petrified, and he suspected that the Chamber of Secrets had, indeed, been opened.

This news is even more disturbing in light of Harry Potter's abilities. Parseltongue is an ability long associated with Dark wizards. Indeed, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was a Parselmouth, as was Anton the Evil and Garth Silvertongue. An unusual affinity for snakes is a warning sign. It also must be mentioned that Potter has a long-standing friendship with Rubeus Hagrid. It is common knowledge that they spend at least one afternoon a week together. "Potter and Hagrid are unusually close," said Lucius Malfoy. "Hagrid isn't known for discretion. Potter can easily weasel anything out of him, including how to open the Chamber of Secrets."

Albus Dumbledore, however, stated in a reply to my first owl, "Harry Potter is not opening the Chamber of Secrets." He declined to say anything further, despite the fact that I felt duty-bound to ask if Potter has an alibi. In light of the events, the article written several years ago, strongly cautioning us not to trust Harry Potter automatically must be reviewed. See page two for a reprinting. Remember, there is no proof whatsoever that Potter is opening the Chamber of Secrets. But I urge parents to caution their children over the school holidays to be very careful around him. There is still the 'terrible power' that must be considered. It may be that the 'terrible power' is his ability to speak Parseltongue... or it may be that he has somehow tamed the legendary monster of Salazar Slytherin, and that is what he might unleash upon the Wizarding world.

Chapter 8 – The First Divergence

“You are certain this does not concern you?” Dumbledore asked. His eyes were very serious. “I myself do not like the level of suspicion aimed at you. Professor Flitwick has expressed rather severe doubts, and Professor McGonagall assured him that she would keep an eye on you.”

Harry shrugged, feeling slightly fatalistic. They were together in the Room of Requirement, along with Snape, Ron, and Ginny. The article – Merlin, he was weary of damn articles – had been in yesterday’s issue of the *Daily Prophet*. This was the first chance they had had to speak of it; the other students had left for the Christmas holidays earlier that day, and Hogwarts had been abuzz with rumor and speculation. People had been watching him very closely.

“It’s just happening a little earlier this time, that’s all,” he said.

“A lot earlier,” Ginny murmured.

Harry took a deep breath. “That’s not to say that I don’t find it disturbing. I do, I swear. But,” he lifted his hands in a gesture of helplessness. “What can I do about it? I’m not going to have a press release or anything.”

“Your moment of fun had bigger consequences than you thought,” Snape said nastily.

“Oi,” Ron said loudly. “It’s not Harry’s fault, how could he know that Lucius Malfoy would go mental?”

“I shouldn’t have done it,” Harry admitted. The elated feeling of having a laugh at Malfoy had passed, and now he regretted the mad urge. Although, in his own defense, Ron was right. “But I had no idea that there’d be another damn article.”

“I’d like to shove my wand up Lucius Malfoy’s arse,” Ginny said, her eyes narrowed. “The nerve of him, honestly. He’s blaming Harry when he’s the one that gave me the diary!”

"I agree," said Dumbledore. "Although I would, perhaps, use my wand to hex him instead. I think you are right, Harry. There is nothing we can do for now. The speculation will die off soon enough, and things will be back to what passes for normal around here."

Snape sneered.

"Professor," Harry began. "What do you think this will do to our plans?"

Dumbledore looked thoughtful. Ron sat up straighter in his chair. "We've got to do it, Harry. I swear, I'll kill that rat if we don't do it soon."

"I might even help you, Weasley," Snape said smoothly.

"Professor?" Harry asked.

"It might have unforeseen consequences," Dumbledore said delicately. "Possibly even another article..."

"Will they believe that Pettigrew is responsible?" Ginny asked forcefully. "We can deal with another article. But is public opinion against Harry enough that Pettigrew will be allowed to go free with a slap on the wrist, a welcome-back-to-the-living party, and a paltry fine for being an unregistered Animagus?"

"I assure you," Dumbledore said. "That Pettigrew will be sentenced, and Sirius will go free." His eyes were very cold.

Harry nodded, relieved. Ginny squeezed his hand, and Ron heaved a huge sigh.

I can't even imagine not having him on our side, Harry thought as the three of them returned to Gryffindor Tower. *Things would be impossible without him. And even Snape.* The truth was, when he'd seen the heading of the article, his stomach had dropped to his feet and had not returned for nearly an hour. Hermione had wanted to talk about it, but that had been the last thing he wanted to do. So he'd pretty much avoided the rest of the students until they left. Hermione

had been quite annoyed with him when she'd finally cornered him to say goodbye.

Not watching where he was going, he walked straight into someone and had to catch himself on the wall to keep from falling over.

"Why are you three out so late?" Percy asked suspiciously. "Is another Philosopher's Stone in danger?"

Ron laughed. "Nah," he leaned forward and whispered, "We were in the kitchens, Fred and George told us how to get in."

"Three plates of food at dinner weren't enough?" Percy said wryly.

"Another two topped it off," Ron said, patting his belly. "This way I won't get hungry in the middle of the night."

Ginny laughed. "I only had hot chocolate," she said.

"You're awfully pale, Ginny," Percy said, concerned. "Maybe you should've had a second cup."

"I'll do that next time," Ginny promised. "You ought to come too, Perce. The house-elves are really nice about it."

"I know," Percy said. When he noticed the way all three of them stared at him, he continued in a defensive tone, "What? I've known how to get into the kitchen for ages... Sometimes I study there."

"And sometimes you take your girlfriend there?" Harry asked, grinning. "I imagine you like eating with her away from everyone."

Percy looked genuinely stunned. "You know about Penelope?"

"Yeah," Ron said. "We, uh, found out over the summer."

"We weren't snooping," Ginny promised. "But there was an owl. And you were holed up in your room the entire time. We put two and two together."

"Just as long as you don't tell Fred and George," Percy said. "They'd never give it a rest."

"We know," Harry, Ron, and Ginny said in unison.

Percy laughed. He then turned to Harry. "Just so you know," he said pompously. "I don't believe any of the ridiculous rumors about you."

"Thanks, Percy," Harry said.

"That article in the Daily Prophet made me question the author's sanity," Percy shook his head. "I was... I was old enough to remember what it was like before... before you defeated You-Know-Who. Uncle Fabian and Uncle Gideon were killed just that summer. Mum and Dad hardly ever took us outside the Burrow, but when they did..." Percy paused. "I can't even describe the differences. You wouldn't have recognized Diagon Alley. And – Ron, Ginny, you were both too young to remember this – I remember how everything changed. More than that," he drew himself up to his full height. "I can't believe that people would think you're the Heir of Slytherin, especially after what happened last year with the Stone."

"It's those damn articles," Ron pointed out. "Harry's getting very bad press."

"Harry, Harry, Harry," said a familiar voice. Harry groaned silently.

"Hi, Professor Lockhart," he said glumly. Percy's words had filled him with pride and relief, but Lockhart had ruined it.

He beamed around at them, his toothy grin gleaming in the dim light of the corridor. It was almost curfew, and the lamps had dimmed, a silent warning for students to hurry back to their common rooms. He was, if anything, even more unbearable this time around. Harry had gotten better at dodging him, but that made Lockhart even more determined to corner him.

"Good evening, Professor Lockhart," Percy said stiffly. Ron and Ginny didn't say anything.

"Walk with me, Harry," Lockhart offered. "I can give you some pointers on how to deal with the press. I read that *dreadful* article. If you want to retain your popularity, you've got to act fast."

Harry grimaced. "I'm not worried about my popularity."

Lockhart laughed. "Of course you are! Famous people are always targets. There are jealous people in the Wizarding world, Harry. Even my own brother... he says some very nasty things about me sometimes. But you've got to use the added press to your advantage _"

"Professor," Percy interrupted. "Curfew is almost upon us. They need to get back to the common room."

Harry sent him a grateful look. "Yeah, if we get caught after hours again, we'll get more detentions."

"Mum would go spare," Ron said.

Lockhart's smile became somewhat fixed. "But you're with me, and I'm a teacher. Even Severus Snape wouldn't dare punish you if I explained to him."

"Harry, didn't you say that you still needed to wrap presents for your aunt and uncle?" Ginny asked. "You'd better do that tonight, otherwise their gift won't reach them before Christmas."

We've become very good liars, Harry thought a little guiltily as he climbed through the portrait hole. Lockhart had reluctantly let him go, although Harry could tell that his determination to take Harry under his wing was only growing. *I can't believe him*.

"I can't believe him," Ron said, echoing Harry's thoughts. "I reckon he's a fraud."

"Who's a fraud?" Fred asked. He and George were playing Exploding Snap in the otherwise deserted common room. It seemed as though everyone else had gone home; the Weasleys and Harry were the only ones staying over the holidays.

"Lockhart," Ginny said.

"He's useless in classes," Percy said. "This is a very important year; if I expect to pass my Defense Against the Dark Arts NEWT next year,

I'll have to have better instruction. Honestly, I don't know what Dumbledore was thinking when he hired that man."

"Percy," George said. "For once you're talking sense."

"All he does in our class is read to us from his stupid books," Fred rolled his eyes.

"You can't have it worse than Harry," Ron said. "He always makes Harry act them out. Last week he had to play a Banshee."

Everyone laughed. "That *is* worse," Percy admitted.

"Although I'm surprised the git isn't terrified," George said.

"You know, with Harry being the Heir of Slytherin and all," Fred said.

Harry was about to open his mouth and tell the other Weasleys that he, Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Neville, and Luna were starting their own dueling club. He had to be honest with himself: He wanted the DA back, all of it. But he had been right to decide not to back in the summer. Just the six of them, that was fine, and it would have to do for now. No matter that Harry's intentions were good, the fact that he was so interested in "learning" spells and teaching others could only be misconstrued. He suspected that if he restarted Dumbledore's Army in the present climate, it would be like adding oil to a fire. And the twins... Harry trusted them with his life, but they would have no idea why it was so important to keep it a secret.

"Harry?" Ginny touched his arm.

"Yeah?"

"We don't really think you're the Heir of Slytherin," George said seriously.

"Oh," Harry said. "I know. But thanks."

"Anyone want to play Exploding Snap?" Ron asked, dispelling the tension.

Christmas came quickly, and Harry awoke to find several parcels at the foot of his bed. Ron, bright-eyed, was eagerly ripping into his own. Harry yawned, stretched, and put on his glasses.

"Merry Christmas!" Ginny came barreling into the room, carrying her own load of presents. "I wanted to open mine in here with you two."

Harry beamed at her. He opened his first gift. It was from the Dursleys, and it was as miserly as usual (one sock). Ron's gift, badly wrapped, was a wand holster made of holly, to match Harry's wand. "Thanks, Ron!" he said.

"Look, you've got a present from Mum and Dad!" Ginny said. Her face fell a little.

Harry took it, and felt a pang. The package was the wrong size for a sweater, and, sure enough, when he opened it he found homemade fudge. *I shouldn't have expected it*, Harry scolded himself. *Just because you think of them as family doesn't mean they think the same of you.* "This looks delicious," he said. "Your mum's cooking always is."

"Oh, Harry," Ginny looked at him.

"It's all right," he said quietly. "It's... I shouldn't have expected it, that's all."

"Mum's off her rocker," Ron offered. "Probably you'll get one next year."

"Get one what?" Fred poked his head in. "Nice haul this year, eh?" He was wearing his sweater... actually, he was wearing George's. It had a big G on the front.

"A brain," Ron said. "Harry's lost his, and he was hoping it would turn up in one of the packages."

The excuse was very feeble. And if Fred had heard Ron's comment about his mum, it would be over. Not that much damage would be done... he could tell Fred that he'd felt like a part of the family over the summer, and Ron had told him that Mrs. Weasley might have

made him a sweater. It would be a little humiliating, but the secret would be safe. It wasn't a big deal.

Fred, however, did not seem to be at all suspicious. He nodded sagely. "Thought you might've left your brain at the Burrow, then?" He winked at Harry. "Don't worry, if it was there, Mum would've sent it on long before this."

Ginny laughed.

The rest of the day was so enjoyable that it made up for the fact that Harry was still a little depressed about the lack of a sweater. They all marched out onto the snowy grounds and had a battle with snowballs, as they had done at the Burrow last year. Then, they trooped over to Hagrid's house, and sang Christmas carols. The Feast was some of the best food Harry had ever tasted. After several hours of eating, Harry finally pushed the remains of his second treacle tart. He wished he had more room in his stomach for a third, like Ron did.

"Meet me in the Room of Requirement," he breathed in Ginny's ear when no one was looking. Percy was engaged in a battle of rubber chickens with George, and Fred was cheering them on.

She nodded.

"Merry Christmas, Ginny," he said when they were finally alone. Ron, who had been surprisingly tactful, had claimed that he was going straight up to bed.

"Merry Christmas, Harry," she said.

The Room of Requirement had provided a large armchair that seated two, and a roaring fire. Ginny leaned up against Harry and sighed in contentment. He put his arm around her, and stroked her hair.

"I hope you liked your gift," Harry said. Knowing that he couldn't give her anything he really wanted to, he'd given her a snow globe of Hogwarts. It wasn't like a Muggle snow globe. Every time Ginny shook it, something different would show. The first time she'd done it, it had shown tiny Quidditch players playing what looked to be an exciting game. Another shake, and they'd seen the Giant Squid that

lived in the lake wave a merry hello. Even Hagrid had made an appearance.

"I loved it," she said. Harry could tell that she was smiling. "It's beautiful. And it represents everything we're trying to protect."

"It's not your only gift," Harry said. When she tilted her head back to look at him, he moved his hand to the side of her face and kissed her. It wasn't fiery and passionate; Harry was ever mindful of the fact that their bodies weren't ready for anything more. It was a promise, though. He tried to put all the tenderness he felt for her into it.

"I liked that gift even more," Ginny said when they parted.

"It reminds me of my seventeenth," Harry said.

"Except it wasn't a goodbye kiss," she pointed out. "Never again."

"I'll never leave you behind again," Harry said. *Except when I have to*, he added to himself. But he stopped thinking about it the moment he was aware of the direction his thoughts were taking. That day was long in the future.

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Christmas Day ended, and the morning of the twenty-sixth dawned clear and bright, although the air was frigid enough to require warming spells if they wanted to go outside. The haze of contentment that had stolen over Harry during the time he'd spent with Ginny in the Room of Requirement had been replaced with grim purpose the moment he woke up.

Ron was in a similar mood as they walked to breakfast. Harry was never more aware of the fact that while their bodies had the appearance of boys not even in their teenage years, they had already grown up. Not only grown up, but had been forced into adulthood by loss and years of fighting for their lives.

Dumbledore was in the hall when they entered and he looked at them sharply. Harry gave a short nod. Today was the day to play a game and catch a rat. The fact that the rat would not be held in Azkaban for

nearly long enough rebelled with his instincts. Unfortunately, it was necessary.

Ron nudged him. "Nervous?"

Harry shook his head. "Not about tonight. I worry about... later."

"You've caught him before, you'll do it again," Ron said comfortably.

And Harry had, though it had been more a happy accident than anything else. After what he'd done to Minerva McGonagall, they'd taken a brief break from Horcrux hunting to trace the man who was responsible for so much pain.

It was cold and wet in a small town called Spinner's End. It wasn't much to look at; it had none of the charm of older villages. It had been built during the Industrial Revolution, and the town's life clearly centered around the ugly building that spewed smoke into the air.

"You're sure he's here, Harry?" Ron whispered.

"That's what Kreacher said," Harry said just as quietly. He'd not wanted to place the elf in danger, so instead of asking him to bring Wormtail to them, he'd asked him to find him and report back. He'd also ordered the elf to remain hidden, to not let anyone see him. Who knew what Voldemort would do if Kreacher had traced Wormtail to his hidden lair?

"Which house?" Hermione stood with her hands on her hips, peering left and right. The factory was not only ugly, it stank, and she wrinkled her nose.

"That one," Harry pointed. "Good thing it's not under the Fidelius Charm."

"Harry," Ron said. "What if Snape's here?"

"What if he is?" Harry asked coldly. "That just means we'll have to fight two of them, not just one. I'd call that lucky."

"Don't be arrogant, Harry," Hermione scolded. "Snape is a skilled wizard, you know that."

"Fine," Harry blew out a breath, not really paying attention to her. "Can we get on with this? I'm not leaving, even if Snape's here."

She muttered something under her breath, and he was thankful that he couldn't hear what was said. Harry was almost frightened by his own rage; it had not abated since Ginny had come with the news that Professor McGonagall was now a permanent resident at St. Mungo's, with a bed next to Frank and Alice Longbottom. Ginny had been sobbing so hard that it had been difficult to understand. But when the truth sunk in, and when Harry realized that the brave witch had been driven insane by the man who had betrayed Harry's parents to Voldemort, cold purpose had overtaken him.

"You're still going to kill him?" Ron asked. He sounded satisfied.

"Oh, yes," Harry said.

Hermione didn't say a word. None of them smiled. No matter what Pettigrew had done, none of them found joy in killing, not even him.

"The enchantments, Hermione," Harry murmured as they drew closer to the house.

She raised her wand and muttered several complex spells. The Anti-Apparition spell was especially needful. No one could get in, and no one could get out. Pettigrew wouldn't be able to use his Dark Mark to summon Voldemort or any of the other Death Eaters.

As soon as she was done, Harry raised his own wand and blasted the front door into splinters and kindling. He cast Sonorus on his own voice. "Come out and fight, Wormtail," he said, and strode in.

He ducked as soon as he saw a flash of green light. It just barely missed him. Ron swore loudly and sent a Blasting Hex in the direction of the rat.

"Hi, Scabbers," Ron said.

The rat was alone in the house. Snape did not come running, nor did any of the other Death Eaters. It was three on one.

“Stand down, Ron,” Harry said. “Wormtail is mine. Hear that, Wormtail? We’re going to duel.”

“H-H-Harry, you don’t want to kill me!” The rat’s eyes were wide with fear. Harry watched him try to hide the fact that he had pressed his Dark Mark, fully intending to call for Voldemort.

“That won’t work,” Harry said. The rat jerked in surprise. “We’ve trapped you in here. Like a rat. This ends today.”

“I d-d-don’t understand,” he whimpered. “You d-d-didn’t want to kill me before. Your father...”

“My father would understand,” Harry interrupted. “You’re done hurting people, Wormtail. You’re done tearing apart families, and torturing people. You’re done.”

Wormtail was fast, but Harry was faster. He dodged the green light. “Trying to kill me, Wormtail? I thought You-Know-Who wanted to kill me himself.”

“D-d-don’t, I have to defend myself,” Wormtail said.

“How in the name of Merlin did you ever end up in Gryffindor?” Harry sneered. “You’re a coward, a betrayer, and a murderer. Even Snape is less of a coward than you.”

“You don’t understand,” Wormtail said.

It was the last thing he ever said. Moments later, he lay choking on his own blood.

“I regret,” said Harry, “that my father ever trusted you.”

Ron and Harry left after they saw Professor McGonagall leave. They followed a safe distance behind her, making sure that she was heading for her office. She needed to be on hand after Pettigrew was

confronted. They made sure to chatter about Quidditch and homework just in case she was listening.

Her office door was shut by the time they reached it.

"Hello, boys," Dumbledore's voice. "I trust you're having a good holiday?"

"Yeah," said Ron. "It's been loads of fun."

"Loads," Harry echoed truthfully. "Did you have a good Christmas too, Professor?"

The light tone was at odds with Dumbledore's serious eyes when he replied, "Thank you, Mr. Potter, I did. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a question for Professor McGonagall." He paused, "Good luck," he whispered.

Ginny was awake and ready when they entered the common room. It was empty. The other Weasleys were probably still in bed; it wasn't even nine o'clock yet.

"Finally," Harry said.

"Still remember that spell?" Ron asked Ginny anxiously. She rolled her eyes.

"Yes, Ron," she said. "How many times are you going to ask me?"

"Just checking," he said defensively.

Harry felt a little knot of apprehension unfurl in his belly. He was glad it was there. He couldn't afford to be cocky; he had to stay on his toes. Wormtail was a coward, but he wasn't completely useless. There was always a chance that things could go wrong no matter how carefully they planned.

"Let's do this," he said.

Scabbers was asleep. He had no idea that they planned to reveal him and send him along to Azkaban. This had been a long time coming.

“Ron, the Chudley Cannons are never going to win,” Harry said as they entered the boys’ dormitory. “They’re the bottom of the league. You should support... I don’t know, Puddlemere United or something...”

“Don’t be stupid, Harry,” Ginny said. “Ron likes rooting for the losing team.”

“They’ll win one of these times,” Ron said stubbornly. They all gripped their wands tightly. Harry’s palms were slightly damp, and his heart thundered in his chest.

And Ginny said, “*Animarevelio*.”

An instant later, the familiar form of Peter Pettigrew appeared. He had retained some of the rat’s characteristics: small beady eyes, pinched features, and crooked teeth. He was fat and wearing clothes that smelled as though he had not bothered to clean them in several months. He blinked in confusion, and dawning horror.

“*Imperio*,” Harry breathed. Wormtail’s eyes immediately glazed over as he became an extension of Harry, Harry’s puppet. He moved jerkily toward Ginny and grabbed her wand out of her unresisting fingers. He then grabbed her, and poked her in the stomach with it. Ron was completely silent, his wand pointed carefully.

Ginny screamed. Harry could not help but admire her acting skills, which had obviously been honed and polished during the last year and a half. The sound of it raised the hairs on the back of his neck. And then she screamed again. Ron started shouting.

“Do it, Harry,” Ginny whispered. She was not afraid; he saw nothing but trust in her eyes.

Grimacing, he forced Pettigrew to cut her, a deep cut on her shoulder, using the same spell that Harry had once used to kill him. Ginny screamed again.

Harry stood still. He had never been especially skilled with the Unforgivables – a good thing, to his mind – and it took all of his

concentration to hold Wormtail under the spell. Wormtail was fighting it, the initial confusion giving way to panic.

Harry walked over to Wormtail. Sweat beaded on his brow as the panic Wormtail felt made his surprisingly strong. Lightning fast, he grabbed Ginny's wand, and replaced it with his own. The curse lifted, and he spun Ginny out of the way.

Several things happened at once. The door slammed open, and Percy was framed in the doorway, still in his pajamas. His mouth was agape, and his hair stood on end. "What the *hell?!!*" He cried in shock.

"PERCY!" Ron shouted. "GET MCGONAGALL!"

Ginny clutched her shoulder, the bleeding already starting to slow. Harry turned back to Wormtail and was slow, too slow to react, to stop him. There was a bang and a flash of light and Ginny crumpled to the floor.

Harry roared with rage. He could not think, he was blind and deaf to everything else except for Ginny. He forgot about Pettigrew and the game they were playing, and rushed to Ginny's side. He fell to his knees when he saw her chest move and watched her draw breath.

He looked up just in time to see Wormtail – apparently deciding that Harry was not the most immediate threat – point his wand at Percy.

"NO!" He bellowed. And not even thinking about it, not worrying about the curse that might come out of Harry's own wand he leapt, putting himself between Wormtail and Percy. Pain hit every nerve in his body, and he crumpled to the floor, senseless from it.

"*EXPELLIARMUS!*" Ron shouted. And the pain ended; Harry watched as his own wand arced through the air and into Ron's waiting hand. He gripped Ginny's wand, and stood shakily to his feet.

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?!"

"Ahh..." Ginny moaned. Keeping his wand on the cowed man, Harry once more moved to her side.

“Are you all right?” He asked. She didn’t answer, only groaned.

“*Incarcerous!*” Harry said, and watched as Pettigrew’s hands and feet were bound together with silver bonds. “What the *hell* just happened...?”

Ron’s lips were white with fury. “Scabbers... Percy, get McGonagall. The rat... that man was Scabbers!”

For a moment, Percy did not move, just stared at Harry as though he had never seen him before in his life. His mouth opened and closed, and Harry did not think that he had ever seen the pompous Percy so overset.

“DAMN IT, PERCY!” Ron shouted. “GINNY’S HURT!”

Percy ran. He thundered down the stairs; just as he left, the twins came rushing in, and stared around at the room – and the stranger laying bound on the floor. “What the hell?” George said uncertainly.

“Go get Madam Pomfrey,” Harry told them. “Go. Ginny’s hurt.”

George left immediately. Fred stared between Ginny and Pettigrew, his face pale beneath all his freckles. He licked his lips. “Care to explain?” He tried to sound flippant, but his voice shook. He sounded very young.

“We don’t know what the hell just happened,” Ron lied. “We were talking... just talking about Quidditch, and then Scabbers... He changed, Fred! Into that man!”

“Scabbers?” Fred asked faintly. “He must be an animagus... they can turn into different animals, like McGonagall.”

“What’s this about a man?” McGonagall’s voice. She sounded confused and angry. “Weasley, calm yourself!”

She pushed Fred out of the way, and stopped in shock. Dumbledore, following closely behind, almost bumped into her. She said nothing for an entire minute. “Peter Pettigrew,” she whispered, clutching her heart. “Peter Pettigrew!”

Wormtail began struggling against his bonds, his eyes wide with panic. Dumbledore waved his wand, and Wormtail was still, his eyes closed. Despite the situation, Harry could not help but be impressed, and wondered what spell could send a man straight to sleep. *A useful one*, he thought.

“Professor!” Harry said urgently. “Ginny’s hurt!”

Dumbledore’s eyes sharpened as he looked at Ginny. He waved his wand for a second time, muttering something under his breath. A pale blue light wrapped around Ginny. For a moment, it glowed red, then faded. “She will be all right,” he said finally. “A few days in the hospital wing should do it.”

Ron fell onto his bed in relief, and Harry’s knees felt weak.

“Explain to me what happened,” Dumbledore ordered.

“I would like to know as well,” Professor McGonagall said.

Ron began, his voice shaking slightly. “We were talking about Quidditch... and all of a sudden that man was here. He used to be Scabbers...”

“Scabbers?” Dumbledore said sharply.

“Yeah, my pet rat,” Ron clarified.

Madam Pomfrey took that moment to run in, her hands full of different potions. Harry saw a bottle of Skele-Gro peeking out of the pocket of her apron. She’d come prepared for anything.

“She’ll be all right,” she announced, after doing the same spell that Dumbledore had. “A few days should do it,” she said, pouring a dark blue potion down Ginny’s throat. “This’ll send her to sleep – someone help me take her to the hospital wing.” George, still silent, went with her. Fred looked torn between wanting to go with his twin and his sister and staying to hear what happened. In the end, he followed the other two.

“Your pet rat, Mr. Weasley?” McGonagall lifted her eyebrows.

"Yeah," he said. "Then... he grabbed Harry's wand, and did something to him."

"What?"

"I dunno, it made his eyes go all funny," Ron said. "Like he was sleep-walking or something."

"The Imperius Curse," Dumbledore muttered. "What then?"

"He... he grabbed Ginny," Ron said. "And cut her on the shoulder..."

"And then... It was weird, Professor," Harry said. "I felt like I was floating, but then it stopped. As soon as he cut Ginny. So I grabbed her wand, and pulled her away. And then he hurt her and Percy came in. He tried to attack Percy –"

"With the Cruciatus Curse," Percy's voice wobbled. "But Harry jumped in front of it, so it hit him instead."

"And then I used that Disarming spell that Lockhart taught us," Ron said. "And Harry made the ropes appear."

"And then Percy went to get you," Harry finished.

Professor McGonagall was completely bewildered. "I don't understand," she pointed at Pettigrew. "He's supposed to be dead! What does it mean, Albus?"

"Just to confirm..." Dumbledore bent down, and pulled up Pettigrew's sleeve, revealing the Dark Mark.

McGonagall sat down hard on the nearest bed. "The Dark Mark!" she said, horrified. "Pettigrew is a Death Eater?"

"So it would seem," Dumbledore said. "We'll have to alert the Ministry. But if my suspicions prove to be true, Peter Pettigrew is responsible for the betrayal of James and Lily Potter," he lifted Wormtails hand, revealing the missing finger. "And, I suspect, for the deaths of those Muggles. Remember, all they ever found of Pettigrew was his finger."

“And Sirius Black is innocent?” McGonagall asked. “He’s been in Azkaban all this time, and he’s innocent?”

Dumbledore bowed his head. “I’ll take him to my office. Mr. Weasley, Mr. Potter, would you come with me?”

Harry nodded.

“Are you sure that’s wise?” McGonagall asked. “If Pettigrew really did betray his parents... He’s just a child, Albus.”

“Mr. Potter needs to understand what has happened today,” Dumbledore said. “He deserves to ask his own questions; he deserves to know why.”

“I’ll alert the Ministry,” McGonagall stood up.

“Give it a few more minutes, Minerva,” Dumbledore said. “Give me a half an hour, and then alert them.”

McGonagall looked as though she understood. “Weasley,” she said to Percy. “Go check on your sister, and make sure the twins aren’t harassing Madam Pomfrey.”

Dumbledore levitated Pettigrew, and Harry and Ron silently followed the older wizard and his prisoner out the door.

“Sirius Black...” McGonagall muttered as they passed.

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Snape was waiting for them, pacing the floor, an unreadable expression on his face. As soon as he set eyes on Pettigrew, however, his face darkened. He was furious. He stared at him with such black rage and malevolence that Harry felt the urge to remind the Potions Master not to kill Wormtail. Fawkes, seated on his perch, trilled and fanned out his tail feathers.

“I’m going to kill him,” Snape announced. “Not now,” he said when Dumbledore, Ron, and Harry made to stand in front of Pettigrew. “Not yet. But I *will* be the one to kill him.”

Harry and Ron exchanged glances. "Harry killed him last time," Ron told him.

Snape looked startled. "You really did?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I provoked him into a duel at a house in Spinner's End – your house, I believe. He was holed up there. I used your own curse to do it... *Sectumsempra*."

"I meant what I said, Potter," Snape sneered. "Don't get in my way. He'll die by my wand."

"If you say 'I called it first,'" Ron said. "I'm going to have to laugh at you, and I don't care how many detentions you give me for it."

Harry stared at Snape for a long time. Pettigrew had led to the events that killed Harry's mother, whom Snape had loved just as much as Harry loved Ginny. Despite the fact that Lily had married James, that love had never waned, and had led to the trust Dumbledore placed in Snape, and the fact that Snape had ultimately laid down his life. Harry completely understood why Snape wanted to kill Pettigrew.

"All right," Harry said.

Snape nodded.

"Shall we wake him?" Dumbledore asked. Not waiting for an answer, he whispered, "*Ennervate*."

The rat's eyes popped open, and he began thrashing against his bonds. "W-what is this? W-w-where am I?"

"You're in my office," Dumbledore said pleasantly. "And you're about to tell us the truth."

"The truth?" His eyes darted from Dumbledore, to Snape, to Harry. "I-I-I don't understand. Harry attacked me!" He pointed.

"You sold my parents to Voldemort." It wasn't a question. He felt grim satisfaction when Wormtail's entire body flinched. "You were their

Secret-Keeper, and you gave him the information as soon as you could.”

“You sold Order secrets to him as well,” Dumbledore said; his voice was still pleasant, though Harry felt chilled by the cold emanating from him. “For an entire year before their deaths.”

“And you killed a street full of Muggles,” Ron added.

“NO!” Wormtail shouted desperately. “That was S-S-Sirius B-B-Black! Everyone knows that! I f-f-faked my death... he’s going to come after me!”

“Sirius Black,” Harry said lightly, “would have died rather than betray his friends.”

“You d-d-don’t know,” Wormtail argued. “How could you p-p-possibly know? You’re just a boy.”

“Stop arguing,” Harry said. “Tell us the truth.”

“You-Know-Who f-f-forced me!” Pettigrew said.

“Filthy liar,” Ron sneered. “What a coward. Can’t even man up to his own allegiances.”

“Voldemort did not force you,” Harry told him. “You did it willingly because you were afraid of fighting what you thought was a losing battle. You thought that Voldemort would win, so you took the Dark Mark. I can’t believe that my father never saw you for what you were.”

“James wouldn’t want you to kill me,” Wormtail sputtered.

“You’re not going to die tonight,” Dumbledore said. “Tonight, I expect you’ll be in Ministry custody, awaiting your trial.”

“But before that,” Snape said silkily. “I’m afraid we have some business to attend to.”

"Your version of events does not coincide perfectly with what actually happened," Dumbledore said. "I'm afraid that your... confusion might be interpreted differently once you're questioned by Aurors."

"Harry used an Unforgivable on me!"

Harry shook his head. "That's not true. *You* used an Unforgivable on *me*. Two of them."

"B-B-But..."

Dumbledore and Snape raised their wands in the same instant. "Allow me to go first," Dumbledore said. "His memory needs to be modified before you Confund him."

He whispered a vastly complex charm that made the air seem to shimmer, and Wormtail's eyes glazed over. His entire body was rigid and shaking, and if it weren't for the fact that his face was utterly blank, Harry would have thought that the man was in terrible pain. Then he slumped over, and appeared to be asleep.

"That will do it," Dumbledore said. "He'll wake up in a few moments, once the charm settles into his brain."

"Will you teach us how to do that?" Ron asked, gaping.

"I don't want to learn," Harry said immediately. "I *hate* memory charms."

"Later, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore murmured.

Snape walked over to stand just in front of Wormtail, wand pointed at his face. As soon as Wormtail blinked in confusion, he whispered, "*Confundo*," He leaned down until his hooked nose was inches from Wormtail. "You will tell the Ministry what happened tonight. You will tell them that you betrayed Lily and James Potter. You will tell them that you cursed those Muggles and killed them. You will tell them you did so because Sirius Black had tracked you down. You will tell them that Black is innocent. You will allow yourself to be taken to Azkaban; you will not attempt to get away. You will escape one year later. You will look for the Dark Lord."

He repeated everything he just said. To ensure, Harry thought, that the message sunk in. Wormtail was drooling a little, Harry noticed dispassionately.

"I'm going to leave," Harry said. "Before the Ministry gets here. You're sure that they'll believe the *Priori Incantatem*?"

"I will show them in the Pensieve," Dumbledore assured him. "They will believe it."

Harry held out his wand. Dumbledore took it, and muttered, "*Priori Incantatem*," and the wand vibrated. The wand showed the Imperius Curse, and *Sectumsempra*.

"Perfect," Harry said. He looked at Ron. "Let's go check on Ginny."

Snape cast a Disillusionment Charm upon himself before he too left. Or Harry assumed he left. Snape did not betray himself with a heavy footstep or a cough. He wondered what Snape was thinking. He had, in fact, said very little about the plans that had been made. Harry wondered if he resented the fact that they had to let Pettigrew go, could not end his existence. Harry resented it. Unfortunately, both Dumbledore's had thought it necessary. If Pettigrew had not gone to Albania to retrieve Voldemort and had not ensured that he would be resurrected when he did, they would have no idea how or when it would happen.

He had to keep telling himself that.

"Harry, Harry, Harry."

"We're on our way to the Hospital Wing, Professor," Harry said tonelessly, not even turning around. "Ron's sister was hurt."

"Oh, I've heard all about the ruckus in Gryffindor Tower," Lockhart said casually, as if he did not care at all that they could have died. "An illegal animagus! You should have brought the rat to me, I can always tell when an animal is not as it seems. It's all in my biography, *Magical Me*."

“How could we have known that Scabbers was that... that man?” Ron asked loudly.

“Ah, you are very young,” Lockhart said. “A very powerful wizard – such as me, just ask anyone at *Witch Weekly* – can sense these things.”

“Next time we’ll be sure to have you inspect all of our pets,” Harry said tonelessly. “If you’ll excuse us...”

He dragged Ron away. The tips of his ears were a bright red, and he feared that if Lockhart bragged anymore about his magical prowess, Ron just might hex him. As soon as they were out of earshot, Ron started to sputter.

“I hate that man,” Ron said viciously.

Harry made a noncommittal reply, thinking of Ginny. He hurried up and for once made his tall friend hurry up to catch him. *She could have died*, he thought, and ice flooded his belly. Pettigrew could have used Avada Kedavra just as easily as he had used whatever spell that hurt her enough to require days in the Hospital Wing. *But she’s not dead, she’s not dead*, he told himself over and over again.

“Harry?”

Harry realized that he had paused and leaned against the wall. His legs felt weak. “I’m fine,” he said. “Sorry.”

He was surprised to find that they were right outside the doors of their destination. “I just... needed a moment.”

Ron seemed to understand. He held the door open, and Harry walked through.

His insides gave a queer jolt when he looked over at her, and saw her beaming at him. She looked tired and pale, but she was awake. Fred and George sat near her head talking in loud voices, teasing their sister. Percy spoke with Madam Pomfrey in a quiet voice. He looked up when Harry entered and smiled, but his brows were furrowed as though he were confused.

“Harry! Ron!” George got up, and Fred was right beside him. “What’s going on? What’d Dumbledore say? Who was that man that attacked you and Ginny?”

“It was Peter Pettigrew,” Harry said. “He’s an animagus. And a Death Eater.”

“Dumbledore questioned him,” Ron said. “And he’s the one who betrayed Harry’s parents to You-Know-Who.”

“Didn’t he get an Order of Merlin for going after that Sirius Black? The one who blew up those Muggles?” Percy asked.

Harry drew himself up. “Sirius Black is innocent. *Pettigrew* was the one who blew up the Muggles,” he said. “When Dumbledore questioned him, he admitted it.”

“And,” Ron said importantly. “*Sirius Black is Harry’s godfather!*”

Everyone in the room gasped, including Ginny. She winked at him when her brothers weren’t looking.

“You’re very calm about this, Harry,” Fred said suddenly. “Having a rat turn into a man and attack you, and then turn out to be the same man who betrayed your parents.”

“Yeah,” George said. “I’d be laying in a hospital bed somewhere if it were me.”

“Uh,” Harry said. “Maybe it hasn’t hit me yet.”

“Watch out when it does,” Fred said wisely.

“We’ll catch you,” George said.

“Yeah, don’t worry,” Fred grinned. “When you fall face first when it finally hits you, we’ll make sure to keep you from breaking too many bones.”

“Thanks,” Harry said dryly.

HPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry walked down to dinner with Ron and Ginny on the day that the other students were set to return from the holidays. He had been feeling quite elated in the past few days; Ginny's return from her stay in the Hospital Wing had brought with it an overwhelming sense of relief, and he could now simply enjoy the fact that Pettigrew was now in the custody of the Ministry. Sirius was probably almost out of Azkaban.

"You're looking happy," Ron grinned at him.

"So are you," Ginny said pointedly. "And I suspect that Hermione's return has as much, if not more, to do with it than Pettigrew."

Harry shushed them. "Not here!" He hissed.

"Stairs are empty, mate," Ron said reasonably.

"I can't wait to meet my godfather," Harry said loudly. Ron muttered something that might have been "Paranoid!" but Harry chose to ignore it. "I can't believe they would just chuck him in without a trial."

"Yeh talkin' abou' young Sirius Black again, Harry?" Hagrid met them at the bottom of the stairs. Harry smirked when Ron looked sheepish.

"Yeah," Harry said.

"Can't say tha' didn' shock the hell outta me," Hagrid shook his head. "Not that... well, now I think on it, Sirius never seemed the type ter kill all them Muggles. But Pettigrew?"

Harry had heard this before. As soon as Ginny had been released, they had marched down to Hagrid's hut and told him what had happened – excluding the part where they had planned it all along. Hagrid had been shocked and had gasped in all the right places. When Harry had told him about the Fidelius Charm and how Wormtail's betrayal had led to his mum's and dad's deaths, he had burst into tears.

"I always reckoned that he was a bit slow," Hagrid said, shaking his massive head.

“He seemed pretty dim to me, too,” Ron said darkly.

Hagrid clapped him on the shoulder. Ron fell to his knees. “Well, you lot showed him, didn’ you? Got ter go. Got to talk ter Dumbledore afore all the kids get back.”

“Are they almost here?” Ron said brightly.

“Reckon so,” Hagrid said over his shoulder. “Saw ‘em coming.”

“Ron! Harry! Ginny!” Hermione’s voice was filled with excitement. Her face was red from the cold, and she appeared to be at the head of a vast crowd of students of all ages. Nevill and Luna were right behind her. “What *happened*?! There’s been all these mad rumors – people kept talking about it on the train – I don’t get the *Daily Prophet*, so I didn’t know anything about it until Neville showed me. Are you all right? Were you really attacked?”

“Breathe, Hermione,” Ron said, looking amused. “The *Prophet* actually managed to get it right this time. Scabbers was a mad Death Eater!”

Harry suspected that Ron really enjoyed saying that. He repeated it to anyone who crossed his path who asked about it... and some who did not ask about it (such as the two Slytherins who had stayed behind for Christmas) were told as well. Harry grinned. “He attacked us, but we fought back.”

“You actually *fought* him?” Neville whispered. He appeared to be deeply impressed.

“Remember how I said we should work on spells together?” Harry lowered his voice. “I ordered some books from Flourish and Blotts, and we’ve already started a bit of practicing. It paid off, because I used one of them on Pettigrew. *Incarcerous*.”

“Good work, Arthur,” Luna said.

Hermione glared at her. “Did you really, *Harry*?” she asked. “That’s a very advanced spell...”

Harry shrugged. "I reckon all we need is practice, Hermione. We were bored a little in the first part of the holidays, and we decided to look through some of Percy's books. It's just lucky that it was one of the ones we tried."

"He practiced it on me," Ron informed her.

"You really are serious about this, aren't you?" Hermione asked uncertainly.

"Yes," Ginny said firmly. "Especially now."

"Yeah," Ron echoed.

Harry nodded his head. "Definitely. Pettigrew just proved that nowhere is really safe, even if we aren't dealing with Voldemort."

"Yeah," Ron said. "Maybe Hedwig will turn out to be a mad Death Eater, too."

"Don't say that in front of Professor Lockhart," Ginny rolled her eyes. "He told Harry and Ron that they should've come to him and shown him the rat," she explained when Hermione and Neville looked confused. "As if he would've been able to tell..."

Hermione's cheeks flushed. "I'm sure he meant well. He is the Defense professor, and –"

"And he's a fraud," Ron said. He grinned slyly at her. "Don't tell me you've got a *crush* on him."

Hermione fidgeted, and Neville took mercy on her. "Well, I was thinking it over at home, and I think practicing spells is important."

"Good," Harry said.

"But Harry," Hermione looked over her shoulder to make sure that no one was listening. No one could hear them anyway; Harry had cast *Muffliato* when they first started talking about it, and had covered it with a cough. "I really don't think we should let on that we're doing this. I don't think the teachers would really mind, but since..."

“Since everyone thinks I’m the Heir of Slytherin, it should be a secret,” Harry finished for her.

“So we’ll have to find a secret place to practice,” Luna said.

Ron, Ginny, and Harry grinned at each other.

“We were wandering around Hogwarts and we found this room...”

Chapter 9 – Trials Unforeseen

“Do not lose your temper.”

“I won’t.”

“Answer their questions with as few words as possible.”

“All right.”

“Stay calm. If they try to badger you, maintain your cool.”

“Okay,” Harry said, annoyed. He and Dumbledore had gone through this before – twice. It was the third of February, and the slow-moving Ministry had finally decided to have a trial for Peter Pettigrew. Harry, Ginny, and Ron had been ordered to attend and give witness to the events that had happened the day after Christmas. “I won’t lose my temper; I’ll answer their questions with as few words as possible; and I’ll stay cool. I promise.”

“Me too,” Ron said. Ginny echoed him.

They were in Dumbledore’s office preparing to travel by Floo to testify against Peter Pettigrew before the Wizengamot. Harry had his best pair of robes on and had even attempted to flatten his hair. Ginny had pulled her hair up into a messy bun; she looked fresh-faced and very young. Ron, however, had not bothered with his appearance as much as the other two had. Ginny pointed her wand at him, and somehow managed to make him look neater.

“Why’d you do that?” Ron asked. “I don’t care how I look in front of those Ministry nutters.”

“I know you don’t,” Ginny assured him. “But Mum will.”

Ron stared at her, aghast. “*Mum’s* going to be there? Why didn’t you say anything?”

Ginny gaped at him. "How long have you known Mum? Do you really think that she'll let us be witnesses in the most important trial of the last decade without being there?"

Ron groaned. "I was hoping it would be a closed trial."

"It is," Dumbledore assured him. "But you are an underage witch or wizard, and it is almost a given that your mother will be there. It is frowned upon in the Wizengamot question young people without their parents there. Listen," Dumbledore said. "We're leaving in just a few moments. I do not like the fact that the other members in the Wizengamot voted to question you at the trial instead of accepting a written account as they did your brother Percy's. Do not expect to answer easy questions. I will protect you as best I can..."

"Professor," Harry interrupted. "Don't try to protect us too much. That'd look odd, wouldn't it? We'll get through this."

"*Be careful,*" Dumbledore said as they lined up in front of the fireplace. Harry took a handful of Floo powder, stood in the fireplace, shouted his destination, and spun outside of the protection of Hogwarts and to the Ministry, where his welcome was uncertain at best.

"Harry, dear," Harry blinked the soot out of his eyes and turned to find Mr. and Mrs. Weasley standing just behind him.

"Hi, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said. "Hi, Mr. Weasley. Come to watch the trial?"

"Of course," Mrs. Weasley said. "I can't have my youngest children up in front of the Wizengamot without being there! What kind of mother would I be if I let them go it alone?"

"Thanks, Mum," Ginny said. She walked over and gave her a hug. "We're a little nervous."

Mrs. Weasley opened her mouth to say something comforting, but it dropped open when she saw her youngest son. "Ronald Weasley! You're here to stand witness in a very important trial, not slouch in your common room! *What* are you wearing? *Never* would have thought you'd be so stupid."

"I didn't know *you'd* be here," Ron said defensively.

Perhaps this was the wrong thing to say because Mrs. Weasley grabbed hold of his ear, and pulled him forcefully around the corner; Harry could hear Ron sputtering, Mrs. Weasley whispering loudly, and several bangs. Ron rejoined them, looking sheepish and somewhat neater. His robes did not look as though he'd slept in them the night before, and his hair was so tamed that it reminded Harry a little of Malfoy's sleek blond hair.

"Aren't you glad she didn't see you before Ginny did some damage control?" Harry muttered. Ron shuddered.

"Come on, everyone," Mr. Weasley said. "We don't want to be late. Courtroom Ten isn't even reachable by the lift... we've got a bit of a walk."

As the five of them (Dumbledore had headed to the courtroom as soon as he had stepped out of the Floo) trooped through the Atrium and got on the lift, Mr. Weasley kept up a steady, light-hearted commentary about the Ministry, the history of the building itself, and the various departments contained therein. He clearly sought to set their minds at ease, and Harry was pleasantly surprised to find that it worked.

"What's this place?" Ron asked when they reached the long corridor that led to the Department of Mysteries.

The place where the prophecy is held, Harry thought to himself. Where Sirius died. Where we fought a battle because I hadn't learned Occlumency.

"That's the Department of Mysteries," Mr. Weasley said. "The people who work there are called Unspeakables. No one knows what they get up to, hence the name."

Ron nodded. Mr. Weasley's words gradually tapered off while they headed down the long flight of stairs and they eventually walked in silence toward the court. The last time Harry had been here, he had been on trial for underage magic. He'd used the Patronus Charm to fight the dementors that Umbridge had set on him.

Umbridge, who had most likely written that article, the one that had cast him in a suspicious light before he had even known, in this timeline, that the odd stuff that he sometimes made happen was magic. Before he'd known about his parents' murders, what his scar had come from, and even Voldemort's name. He wondered if she would be there. *Probably*, he thought glumly.

Still, he straightened his shoulders and attempted to flatten his hair once more before he walked across the threshold. It was crowded with grim-faced witches and wizards, all staring at the center of the room, where Peter Pettigrew sat, chained to a chair. As soon as he entered, though, all eyes turned to him. Harry gulped.

Ginny took a deep breath, and he wished he could take her hand.

"The witnesses are here," said a woman with a stern voice. She had a monocle pressed to her eye, and Harry recognized her as Amelia Bones, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. "I move to begin the trial of Peter Pettigrew."

Pettigrew whimpered as the other witches and wizards murmured their accord.

"Miss Ginevra Molly Weasley," Amelia Bones said. "Approach."

Ginny walked forward steadily and stopped when she was about a meter away from the dais upon which Minister Fudge, Dumbledore, Amelia Bones, a young, dark-haired wizard, and (Harry's stomach clenched) Dolores Umbridge all sat.

"Describe to us the events leading up to the attack."

Ginny described it flawlessly. If Harry had not known any better, he would have believed that she was being perfectly honest.

"And you were speaking of Quidditch?" Amelia Bones asked.

"Yes, ma'am," she said. "I had no idea what was going on."

"It was reported that you were cursed by the man in the center of the room," she pointed. "Can you verify for me that it was, indeed, him?"

Ginny turned her head and stared at Wormtail, who was now quivering so hard that the chains that bound his hands and feet made faint clanking sounds. "Yes," she said assuredly. "He's the man that appeared."

"Thank you," she said. "You are released. Ronald Bilius Weasley, please come forward."

Harry began to relax. They were doing fine so far. Amelia Bones had not asked probing questions, and had taken Ginny at her word. Ginny sat next to him and gave him a very small smile, so quick that he barely noticed it.

The questions put to Ron were nearly identical, up until the point that Ginny had been hit by a curse. Harry silently cheered as Ron's voice remained steady; he had clearly taken Dumbledore's advice to heart, and said just enough to answer a question and without raising the possibility of more.

"—So then I used that Disarming spell that Professor Lockhart taught us," Ron finished.

"And then?"

"Harry used magic to tie him up," he said easily.

"*Hem, hem,*" An all too familiar voice. Harry had to bite his tongue to stop from groaning. Ginny tensed up.

"If I may ask a few questions?" Dolores Umbridge said in her sickening sweet tone.

"Of course, Undersecretary Umbridge," Amelia Bones said formally.

"You claimed that Harry Potter used a charm to tie Pettigrew up with magic," Umbridge said. "Where did he learn this charm?" she giggled, a little tinkle of a sound that made Harry want to strangle her. "I do not believe that it is taught to second years."

Don't say anything rude, Ron, don't do it, Harry prayed. He needn't have feared.

“Oh,” Ron said. “Harry and I looked through my older brother Percy’s spell books.”

“Why?” she pressed. “Isn’t learning the required spells enough of a challenge?”

“Well,” Ron said. “We’re both pretty... pretty good at Defense Against the Dark Arts. And we wanted to learn more about them.”

“No other reason?” she asked. She sounded as though she did not believe him.

Ron’s ears turned bright red, and Harry squeezed his eyes shut. “Well...” he looked over at his mother. “My brothers... they like to have a laugh. We thought we’d... surprise them.”

Harry could see heads nodding in the crowd. He wondered if Fred and George knew that their reputation extended beyond Hogwarts. Despite the situation, Harry wanted to grin.

“Where did you practice these spells?”

“In the common room,” Ron said promptly. “Mostly when we knew that they were out flying or at dinner. It was over the holidays.”

“You practiced on each other?”

“Yeah,” Ron said slowly. Harry felt a sickening drop in his stomach, though he did not know why. *What is going on here?*

“Do you often allow Harry Potter to tie you up using magic?”

Was that... Did she just... Did she just say what I think she just said? Harry gaped at her. Several members of the Wizengamot gasped. Amelia Bones whipped around so fast that her monocle flew out of her hand and hit Ron on the shoulder. Ron bent over and picked it up. Harry could see that his fingers were trembling; he was probably trying to stop himself from doing something he would regret, like attack Umbridge.

“That was —” Madam Bones said furiously.

But Molly Weasley stopped her. "WHAT EXACTLY ARE YOU INSINUATING ABOUT MY SON?" She did not shout, precisely, but the warning and threat was made perfectly clear. She had her wand out, though it was not pointed at Umbridge. Yet.

"This is a trial," Umbridge said primly, though Harry could see her ugly lips twist in something that might be a smile. The urge to hurt her thundered through his veins. "And you are not permitted to speak."

"I am his mother," Mrs. Weasley said forcefully. "And I will not allow you to –"

"Molly Weasley is quite right," Dumbledore spoke for the first time. Harry looked away from Umbridge, and caught Minister Fudge look furtively and fearfully at the older wizard. "As Chief of the Wizengamot, I declare that line of questioning inappropriate. You have our apologies, Mr. Weasley. You may go back to your seat."

Ron didn't say anything, but turned and walked toward him. His face was as bright red as his hair, and he had clenched his fist so tightly around a wad of his robes (Harry could only be thankful that he had managed not to draw his wand), that his knuckles were white.

There was a flurry of motion and whispering so loud that Harry felt he was sitting next to a large nest of snakes – the only difference being, of course, that he could not understand what they were saying. Amelia Bones conferred urgently with the Minister, nervously tapping her returned monocle on the desk in front of her. The only two not speaking to anyone, Harry noticed, was Dumbledore and Umbridge. Dumbledore was watching Pettigrew carefully, and did not appear to notice Harry's stare. Umbridge, however, was looking at Harry, and suddenly he was absolutely positive that she had asked Ron that question to humiliate him. And any doubt that still lingered about the author of the article seeped away. The look of satisfaction on her face proved it.

"Harry James Potter," Madam Bones sounded flustered. "Please approach."

Harry looked away from Umbridge and walked forward. His heart was pounding in his chest; he only hoped that he could control himself as

Ron had done, but if Umbridge was allowed to question him, he did not know what would happen.

“Describe the events, please,” she said.

He did so, careful to keep his voice steady and clear. *Dumbledore was right to remind me twice not to get angry*, he thought ruefully. He did not even look at Umbridge, but stared straight at Amelia Bones. He could tell, however, that she and the others on the dais (and perhaps Ron and Ginny and their parents) were the only ones who were actually listening. The other witches and wizards were busy whispering to one another.

“I do not support the line of questioning Undersecretary Umbridge took,” she looked troubled. “But do you understand why it is a... concern for the Ministry that you show knowledge of spells that ought to be beyond a second year?”

Harry decided, in a split second, to play dumb, “No, Madam Bones, I do not.”

She looked surprised. “Surely you are aware of the prophecy?”

I should have known that this was as much my trial as it is Wormtail's, Harry thought bitterly. “Yes, I am.”

“Then you know that the prophecy states that you are in possession of a ‘terrible power’ that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named does not know?”

“Yes,” Harry said firmly.

“And you do not think that this would concern the Ministry?”

“Well...” Harry said slowly. “I’m only twelve years old.”

“Madam Bones,” Dumbledore said quietly. “Mr. Potter is not on trial based on a prophecy made before he was born. Mr. Potter is not, in fact, on trial at all.”

Harry began to wonder if he was actually here, or if he was having a nightmare. He pinched himself surreptitiously. *Wouldn't that have been nice?*

"Recent allegations..." Madam Bones said delicately.

"If you are referring to the Chamber of Secrets," Dumbledore said. "I stand by what I said before. Mr. Potter is most definitely not the Heir of Slytherin. I am afraid that I cannot permit this questioning to continue. We have the matter of Peter Pettigrew to decide. Question Mr. Potter further, if you wish, but ensure that it is related to the matter at hand."

Harry felt grimly satisfied that Dumbledore had enough power to halt this, and even happier that the Minister had not once questioned his authority. In fact, Amelia Bones looked chastened rather than angry. She nodded.

"Very well," she said. "No further questions, Mr. Potter. You may leave now if you wish."

"May I stay?" Harry asked. He looked over at Wormtail, who was nibbling on his fingernails. "He betrayed my parents..."

Her expression softened. "You may."

He returned to his seat, not even daring to look at Ron and Ginny. He knew, without even having to look, that they were both furious.

The trial went on without a hitch after that. Amelia Bones questioned him, and he admitted to everything in a shaky voice. He told the crowd of witches and wizards how he had betrayed Lily and James Potter, how he had been tracked down by Sirius Black the next day, and how he had transformed into a rat after he blasted the street, killing the Muggles, and leaving behind a finger to ensure that the Ministry thought him dead. Then he described how he had found the Weasleys, and stayed with them. And in December, he had finally grown tired of his ruse, and had attempted to escape.

The vote deciding his guilt was unanimous. Within two hours, Peter Pettigrew had been given a life sentence in Azkaban – Harry was

relieved that Dumbledore's conviction that the Ministry would not immediately throw him to the dementors to receive the Kiss held true.

Weak-legged with relief and residual anger, Harry made his way back to the Atrium with the Weasleys. No one said anything, to his relief. He suspected that Mrs. Weasley was still in a dangerous temper.

"Now," she said finally when they stood in front of the fireplaces. "You three get back to school safely. I expect plenty of people will have questions for you... you don't have to answer them, if you don't wish to. Don't let the twins harass you; write to me if they do."

"All right, Mum," Ginny smiled at her.

Mr. Weasley hugged his children and shook Harry's hand. "I've got to run; Remus Lupin asked me to owl him... he knew that I'd be there. Be careful."

"Goodbye, dears," Mrs. Weasley said.

Harry had never been happier to leave the Ministry. Not just for his sake, but for Ron's, who was about to explode.

"*I'm – going – to – kill – her!*" he snarled once they had reached the sanctuary that was Dumbledore's office. "You have no idea how close it was. *Can you believe...?*" he broke off, apparently too enraged to continue.

"What happened?" Snape asked. He had apparently been waiting for them. Before they could answer, Dumbledore appeared in the flames, and stepped out, brushing soot off his scarlet robes.

"Umbridge accused Harry of bugging me!" Ron said.

"I'm dead certain that she's the one who wrote that article," Harry said. "She set out to humiliate me – us – today."

Snape looked at Dumbledore. "Is this true?"

"I think you are right, Harry," Dumbledore said. "From what you have told me, from what I know of her, and what she said today, I am

certain of it. And yes, Severus, she very clearly insinuated that Harry and Ron have a sexual relationship.”

“What were her exact words?” Ron pretended to think. “Oh, yeah. ‘Do you often let Harry Potter tie you up using magic?’ I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forget it.”

Snape stared at him. “And you didn’t kill her? You have more control than I thought.”

“No, all three of them behaved with admirable control,” Dumbledore said. “During Umbridge’s questioning, and when Harry was questioned. They spent as much time asking about the prophecy as they did about Pettigrew. I stopped it, both times. I can’t say that I didn’t expect that there would be some allusion to it.”

“I did like Dumbledore told me,” Harry said. “I tried to use as little words as possible.”

“Which is why I was able to step in when I did,” said Dumbledore. “Had he given more information away – such as attempting to reassure them of his intentions – I would have had to allow it.”

“Why is that?” Ginny asked. “It would have been off topic, anyway.”

“Harry could have left them an opening,” Dumbledore said. “If he had, there would have been nothing I could say, legally speaking, that would have had any authority behind it. There are different rules for witnesses than there are for criminals on trial. They are not allowed to question step outside of the bounds. But if the witness himself mentions it – such as, Harry, if you had said that you were not the Heir of Slytherin, or if you had used your experience with the Philosopher’s Stone to attempt to convince them – then Madam Bones would have had every right to pursue it.”

“Good for you, Harry,” Ron said. “You kept your mouth shut.”

“I was too worried about killing Umbridge,” Harry said.

“Well,” Ginny said. “At least that’s over. We know why they insisted on having Harry, Ron, and I testify, instead of letting us just send a letter like Percy did. They wanted to question Harry.”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said.

“Professor, what about Sirius?” Harry asked. “They’re going to free him, right?”

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. “Yes, they are. They were arguing about how they were going to recompense him for his time spent in Azkaban as an innocent man – and for the fact that they did not give him a trial – as I left. I daresay that Sirius will be a free man within days, if not hours.”

“How delightful,” Snape said sourly.

Harry looked at him. “That kind of attitude is exactly why no one in the Order of the Phoenix trusted you,” he pointed out.

“It’s true,” Ginny nodded.

“If I can manage not to kill Umbridge,” Ron said. “Then *you* can be civil to Sirius.”

Snape scowled, but he didn’t hand out real detentions to them for stating the facts. Harry hoped he thought about it, because he would not tolerate enmity between two of his best allies.

HPHPHPHPHPHP

The Room of Requirement provided enough space for the six of them to practice dueling each other, for which Harry was very grateful. He stood facing Ginny and knew that she was in just as foul a mood as he was. Two students had been petrified the night before, despite all their efforts to avoid that happening. Dumbledore had been the one to protect the students last night. When the coin had heated up, and Ginny had left the common room, Harry had sent a Patronus to Dumbledore. They were working outside of the original timeline now, with the hope that it would cause the events that were to happen come sooner.

Dumbledore had cast a very subtle charm that should have caused any student or teacher to immediately realize that they had something to do in the opposite direction. It would have worked had two students not been snogging in a broom closet. Now a Ravenclaw, named Jacob Hallwell, and a Hufflepuff, named Emily Gareth were laying in the Hospital Wing, waiting for the Mandrake Potion to restore them to themselves.

“At least they’re... they’re only petrified,” Harry whispered.

She nodded. “I know. I still feel awful about it, though.”

Harry glanced over at Neville, who was dueling with Ron. He felt bad for being surprised that Neville was picking it up quickly; after all, he had been one of the fastest learners in Dumbledore’s Army. But Neville had never displayed that kind of power at any time until his fifth year. It amazed Harry that Neville had only needed confidence all that time. True, Ron was not really trying – it wouldn’t have been fair, not to mention highly suspicious. But Neville now had a firm grasp on both *Expelliarmus* and *Stupefy*.

“Great, Neville!” he called when the other boy sent Ron flying back on some cushions.

“I did that trick with the wand you showed me earlier,” Neville said.

Hermione looked over. “You’re a really good teacher, Harry. I didn’t think we’d be able to manage this, to be honest.”

“Thanks,” he said. “What do you say we call it a night? We don’t want the Ministry to get suspicious, now do we?”

“I can’t *believe* what happened to you,” Hermione flared up at once. “They should have been pleased that you knew how to do that spell!”

Harry avoided Ron’s eyes, not that there was a chance that he was looking at him. What Umbridge had said had not remained a secret at all. None of them had said anything, but some of the students – like Susan Bones and Marietta Edgecombe – had had parents at the trial. It had spread around the school like wild fire, and the taunts and sneers – combined with the fear and suspicion – had contributed to

Harry's foul mood as much as the fact that students had been petrified. Umbridge's plan to humiliate him had certainly worked.

That bitch, he thought. It had been three weeks since the trial, but it had felt like three years. *Please let the rumors die down soon.*

His anger propelled him to the Gryffindor common room, where he was met with both laughter and nervous looks. This did not help. He shoved past a couple of first years and stomped up the stairs.

"Going to bed, Potter?" someone asked, laughing. Probably an especially brave seventh year. "And Weasley's going to? You'd better go up there too, Longbottom. They may need a chaperone."

"Shhhhhh," someone hissed.

"Yeah, shut the hell up about my brother, Levins," Fred said loudly.

"Or do you want to see what we'll do to you?" George said just as loudly.

Ron slammed the door behind them so hard that it almost shattered the wood. He rummaged angrily through his trunk, and pulled out his pajamas. He was muttering something under his breath, but Harry couldn't make out what he was saying.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Just fantasizing about how I'm going to tear her *limb – from – limb*," he said darkly. Harry had no doubt that he was talking about Umbridge.

"Ah, I was thinking the same thing," Harry said. He lay back in his bed, and took off his glasses. "I'm going to do it slowly..."

"I'll make sure it hurts... a lot," Ron said. Then he paused. "How's Ginny holding up?"

"She's doing all right," Harry said. "Shook up about Hallwell and Gareth. She said she's going to write in the diary again tomorrow."

"I can't believe I'm saying this," Ron said, "since she'll be in danger and all, but I hope it happens tomorrow. What if someone's killed next time?"

"I know," Harry said. The thought still made icy fear flood his belly.

Instead, it was three days later. Just as Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville left the Transfiguration classroom – their last class of the day – the coin in his pocket burst with heat. Harry exchanged glances with Ron. He had a feeling, although he did not know for sure, that this was it.

"Damn!" Ron slapped his hand to his forehead. "We've got to go! Snape will kill us!"

Harry gaped at him. "Oh! Our detention."

"Sorry!" they said in unison to their bewildered friends, and sped off.

As they turned the corner, they heard Hermione say, "They've got detention *again*?"

"They must be in a hurry," Neville said. "They're going the wrong way to the dungeons."

Harry and Ron walked quickly, and found an empty classroom. Harry pulled out his invisibility cloak and, checking to make sure the coast was clear, threw it over himself and Ron. They hurried in and closed the door. He pulled out his wand and whispered "*Expecto Patronum!*" and his stag appeared in front of them. "Tell Dumbledore this: 'In classroom near Transfiguration.'"

It took Dumbledore fifteen minutes to reach them. It felt like twenty years.

"I think this is it," Harry told him. "Ginny was writing in it; she usually only takes about three minutes. But the coin is still hot. Either he's taken her down there to lure me or he's going to unleash the basilisk."

"We're still going to have to wait," Dumbledore said. "I timed it last time, you know. It took the Basilisk almost an hour to appear in the

corridor. I'll set the spell so that if it makes an appearance, we will know that this is not the time. And no," he continued when Harry opened his mouth, "we will ensure that this is, in fact, the time before you two run off."

"Fine," Harry said.

They sat back as Dumbledore waved his wand. "*Cassensentia*," he said, and a brilliant white light streamed from his wand and went straight through the walls. "That will alert me of anything bigger than a human in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom," he explained. Then "*Protego Horribilis*" he said, and a great wind stirred up around them. It too fled. "I'm not taking chances again," he said grimly. "I've effectively stopped anything from getting out of that bathroom – and getting in. I've also blocked off the corridor around it, fifteen meters from the door. Once we have confirmation, I will take it down so you can go."

"All students return to your dormitories at once," Twenty minutes later, McGonagall's voice startled Harry so much that he toppled off the desk upon which he sat. "All students return to your dormitories at once. Prefects, ensure that they do so."

"This is it," Harry said quietly. *Finally*. "She said that the last time, but I don't know how she knew already."

"Very well," Dumbledore said. He gazed down at Harry and Ron, and then let his eyes linger on Harry. He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again. "Good luck," he said finally.

They almost literally ran into Minerva McGonagall the moment they sped out of the room. Ron, who was fastest, threw himself to the side to avoid her and crashed into the wall instead. She looked quite worried, Harry saw. Wispy tendrils fell around her face where her hair had fallen out of her ever-present bun, and her mouth was not pressed into a firm line, but was slightly parted. Her eyes were filled with concern.

"Albus!" she cried, as soon as she saw Dumbledore. "The worst has happened – a student has been taken into the Chamber of Secrets."

"Who?" Dumbledore asked sharply.

Her eyes darted from Ron to Harry. "Ginny Weasley," she said in a low voice.

"MY SISTER?!" Ron shouted.

But McGonagall continued. "I was walking with a student when I saw Ginny Weasley walk into that bathroom none of the girls want to go into; the one that is haunted by Moaning Myrtle. I thought it was odd... but then I saw... I saw that there was a new message written on the wall... 'Her skeleton will remain in the Chamber forever.' Albus... this is the end of the school, I fear."

"Minerva, listen to me," Dumbledore said urgently.

She ignored him. "I ran into Gilderoy, he says he'll retrieve her, but I sincerely doubt that. He'll be in his office, getting ready to flee. *What are we going to do?* Whatever the monster is, it made it so I couldn't even try to follow... I was pushed back –"

"Minerva, alert the Weasleys," Dumbledore interrupted. "And go to my office. I will meet you there. Tell them to come immediately."

She nodded. Then, remembering herself, she turned on Harry and Ron. "Get back to your dormitories. Now," her voice softened. "Mr. Weasley, we'll do everything we can..."

Harry and Ron did not need to hear another word, but left. Harry turned back once, and saw such a look of helplessness on her face that he longed to tell her not to worry... he'd bring Ginny back and defeat the Basilisk. Instead, he followed Ron.

As soon as they rounded the corner, they both began sprinting. Harry did not remember drawing his wand, but it was out, and he grasped it firmly. Hogwarts had never seemed larger. They went down the stairs three at a time. Had there been any other students about, there would have been injuries, he was sure. They set off down the third floor corridor, near the Hospital Wing and the Defense classes. The halls were still, mercifully, empty.

"HARRY! RON!" Neville shouted.

Harry ran right into Ron when he slowed and they both fell, hard, smacking the stones.

“Neville?” he said. Neville’s face was bright red and sweaty, as if he too had been running.

“I’ve been looking...” Neville bent over and gasped for breath. “For you... ever since... Ginny, she’s been... taken... I saw it! The monster took her!”

“We know,” Harry and Ron said at once.

“We’re going to rescue her,” Harry told him. “Don’t worry.”

“But –“

“No time, Neville!” Ron bellowed. “We know where it’s taken her.”

“Let me come with you,” Neville said at once, as he clutched a stitch in his side.

“NO!” Ron shouted. “Don’t worry, we won’t let anything happen –“

“I CARE ABOUT GINNY, TOO!” Neville shouted. Harry stared at him, stunned. He didn’t think he’d ever seen Neville truly angry before, not now and not then. His face was almost purple, and his fists were clenched, as if he were about to start throwing punches.

“Neville,” Ron began.

“DON’T ‘NEVILLE’ ME!” He turned on Harry, and pointed at him. Harry couldn’t help but flinch. “Isn’t this why you’ve been helping us? So we could make a difference?”

Harry didn’t bother trying to deny it. Neville had expressed these same sentiments when Harry had tried to talk him out of coming to the Department of Mysteries with him. He’d been right then, and, if Harry and Ron had not traveled from the future, he’d be right now. He looked at Ron pleadingly.

“Or was it just a lie?” Neville asked. Behind the anger, Harry saw a deep reservoir of hurt and insecurity. If he continued to refuse Neville, if he and Ron walked away from him, something would break inside him. Perhaps not their friendship, but the small bit of confidence that Neville had gained from mastering several spells would be lost. They couldn’t tell him that they knew what was happening, not without giving themselves away. Harry really only had one choice...

“All right,” Harry said quietly.

“What?” Ron said blankly. Harry shook his head at him.

“Neville’s right,” he said. “He cares about Ginny, too. He should come with us.”

They marched on in silence. Harry kept jerking at small sounds, expecting Hermione and Luna to pop out from behind a door, or a tapestry, or a suit of armor and demand to go with them. He thought very quickly. *Ron can keep him occupied, he thought. I can go on ahead, and Ron can stop Neville from following... somehow...*

“D’you really know where the Chamber of Secrets is?” Neville asked hesitantly.

“Yeah,” Ron said roughly. “It’s in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom.”

“Isn’t that a *girls’* bathroom?” Neville asked. If Harry had not been so petrified that something would go wrong, he may have laughed. Neville sounded more horrified about going into a girls’ bathroom than meeting a Basilisk. Although he didn’t know it was a Basilisk that they would be facing.

“There’s a Basilisk in there,” Harry said. “Do you know what that is?”

When Neville shook his head, Ron said, “It’s a giant snake that can kill people with its eyes. And its fangs are poisonous too.” Ron said this very harshly, and Harry could tell that he was trying to get Neville to back out while he still could. *Waste of an effort, Harry thought. Neville’s not a coward.*

“H-H-How did you figure this out?”

"It's a snake," Harry said quietly. "I can hear it. That's what that voice I've been hearing is. It's been moving around in the pipes. That's why no one can see it."

"But how do you know it's a Basilisk?" Neville pressed.

"Uh," Ron said. "We overheard Dumbledore talking to McGonagall. He was listing all the things that could have done it... uh... and I know what a Basilisk is, and then I realized that if Harry has been hearing it, then a snake is the best bet..."

Ron's nerves were interfering with his ability to lie, and Harry was glad when he stopped talking. Thankfully, Neville did not have any more questions. Terrible images of Ginny lying as still as death on the dirty floor of the Chamber of Secrets kept popping up behind his eyes. His heart was in danger of leaping out of his chest.

"Professor Lockhart!" Neville said loudly.

Ron groaned. "Neville..."

"Look! He's leaving!" Neville said indignantly. "He's supposed to be helping Ginny, too! He's got his trunk..."

There was no chance at all that they were going to avoid this. Lockhart was less than ten feet away and staring at them with shock. His face was pale and his usually perfectly tended hair was mussed. His eyes were wild, and all he seemed capable of was staring at them; he had dropped his over-flowing trunk onto his foot, and he had not even noticed.

Ron sighed. "What the hell are you doing, Lockhart?" he asked. "Aren't you supposed to be helping my sister?"

"Urgent business... got to run..." he said weakly.

"You're the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher!" Neville said. "You told the other professors that you were going to help."

"You don't understand..."

Harry drew his wand. "I understand perfectly. You're a fraud," Lockhart twitched, reaching for his wand. "*Expelliarmus!*"

"You're coming with us," Ron said roughly, pocketing Lockhart's wand after catching it. "You can leave your trunk here. I'm sure you'll need it when you're sacked. Good thing it's packed already."

It's not that bad that he's here again, Harry thought when they finally reached the corridor. He felt a faint twinge of unease... He shook his head. *Stay focused on Ginny, the diary, and the Basilisk.*

It took them another five minutes to reach the end of the corridor. Harry could see the doors that led to the bathroom and the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. They were closed.

"The monster..." Neville said nervously. "It made it so McGonagall couldn't follow Ginny. She just bounced right off it."

"We'll try anyway," Ron said harshly.

Dumbledore had already taken down his enchantment – he must have expected that Ron and Harry had already reached it. He had obviously not expected that they had picked up two others. Harry narrowed his eyes and stared at Lockhart.

"Come on, Harry!"

He shook his head sharply and moved on. Neville walked with his hand out, obviously expecting to be pushed back at any moment. Lockhart kept whimpering and muttering things under his breath that Harry did not particularly want to hear.

Ron pulled open the door and, wand still pointed at Lockhart, ushered them in. Harry looked around the familiar room; it was dingy and poorly lit, and smelled faintly of something unpleasant. Just as he'd remembered.

"Where do you reckon it is?" Harry asked Ron.

"You said you knew!" Neville accused.

"We know it's in this bathroom, but we haven't quite figured out where..." Harry lied. He pretended to think. "If it's going through the pipes –"

"It?" Lockhart said in a faint voice.

Ron jabbed his wand at him. "Shut up," he growled. Then looked at Harry, "Maybe over by the sink? If it isn't there, we can check the toilets..."

Harry nodded. He made a cursory examination of the sinks, ignoring the fact that Moaning Myrtle had joined them. "You're not supposed to be here," she said in a sing-song voice. "This is a *girls'* bathroom."

Neville muttered his agreement.

"Found it!" Harry said when he had taken enough time looking for the small snake that decorated the tap on one of the sinks. "Look... it looks like a snake... reckon I should use Parseltongue?" He gritted his teeth. He glanced over at Neville, who looked very pale. "You don't have to come, Neville," he pointed out.

"I'm coming?" Neville tried to say it firmly, but it came out as a question. Then, when Ron opened his mouth, he said, "I'm coming."

"Open," Harry said. All four watched in silence as the sink moved away, revealing the large mouth of a pipe that looked like a maw, waiting to swallow them and enclose them in darkness.

"You first," Ron said to Lockhart.

"Isn't necessary, boys," Lockhart quivered. When Harry raised his wand and, a split second later, Neville did, he swallowed. With a moan, he jumped in and disappeared.

"I'll go next," Ron said. "Don't want him to get into trouble down there."

"I-I-I'll go," Neville said. He took a deep breath and followed Ron. Harry could hear him scream all the way down. Once he heard voices echoing oddly up through the pipe, he climbed in and slid.

His robes were caked in slime and filth, and Harry had to breathe through his mouth for several moments. The faint, unpleasant smell in the bathroom was nothing compared to the stench. He'd forgotten...

"Ugh," Lockhart said. "What is that awful *smell*?"

"The Basilisk," Ron said casually. "Not only can it kill you if it looks you in the eye, it smells, too!"

Lockhart whimpered.

"*Lumos*," Harry whispered, and his wand immediately lit up. It cast an eerie light that shimmered on the wet walls.

"I th-think we're under the lake," Neville said.

Harry marched forward, toward the tunnel. *Maybe we can pretend that only I can go forward once we reach that other door*, he thought. Or...

Neville screamed, and Harry whipped around. He and Lockhart both had their eyes hands pressed tightly over their eyes. Harry turned around again, and saw the skin that the Basilisk had shed... it covered the entire path; they would have to step over it. But wait...

He heard Lockhart's knees hit the ground and scrape against the bones of the small animals that littered the tunnel. *It's just Lockhart*, he thought, but that feeling of unease had grown. His heart thumped, and his instincts were on full alert. Suddenly, with a rush of understanding, he spun around, "RON, YOUR WAND!" he shouted.

He saw Ron's shocked face in the light that came from his wand, but it was Neville who cried out.

"*Obliviate!*"

Harry was simply too slow. He tried to dodge it, to throw himself out of the way, but the bright white light of the memory charm hit him full on the face. He could feel it seeping into his brain. "No, no, no," he heard his own voice say. He put his hands over his head, trying to

protect it, but it was too late. The memories flickered past his closed eyelids, and he could only feel horror and impotent rage. the Chamber, Tom Riddle, the diary, Ginny lying as though dead on the floor, the sword... they slipped away...

He couldn't hold the memories in and in a second they were gone.

Chapter 10 – Interlude: Albus Dumbledore

Albus Dumbledore paced his office, trying not to listen to the broken sobs of Molly Weasley. When the Weasleys had first arrived, he had been confident that Ginny Weasley would be found safe and sound. Harry Potter and Ron Weasley would bring her back to the office, where a joyful reunion would be shared by all.

He checked his watch he had bought for himself on his seventeenth birthday for the fifth time in as many minutes. He had last seen Harry and Ron outside a transfiguration classroom. That was three hours ago. What had gone wrong? Though the thought was terrible, Albus could not help but consider the possibility that all three were lost. True, Harry and Ron might have been Petrified – they both knew very well not to look at the basilisk – but the basilisk still had fangs, and the diary was slowly sapping Ginny Weasley's life away.

"One more thing," he muttered to the Weasleys, who did not appear to be listening to him. He knew it was desperate; he knew that even the Elder Wand had its limits. But he gathered up as much force as he could, whispered "*Homenum Revelio*" and sent it through the walls in the direction of the Chamber of Secrets.

Nothing. He looked at Fawkes. He remained stubbornly on his perch, and seemed completely unaware of the tension and grief in the room: he was preening his tail feathers. From what he had seen in the Pensieve, Fawkes had brought Harry the Sorting Hat, from which he could draw Gryffindor's sword. But Fawkes was still here...

"Albus," Mr. Weasley said. "Are you *sure* that you don't know who is opening the Chamber?"

He had asked this question several times before. Albus knew where he was leading, but refused to allow thoughts and conversations to drift that way. "No, I do not," he lied. "We have been conducting an investigation, of course, but nothing has been conclusive."

Arthur Weasley grimaced as though he were in physical pain. "My daughter is down there," he stated, "and we don't know why, or who, or how? Albus, you're *certain* that it isn't –"

Thankfully, Minerva McGonagall took that moment to pound on the door and, without waiting for a reply, pushed it open. Her face was set in grim lines; Albus had not seen her quite so undone since... well, since he, she, and Hagrid had left Harry on the doorstep of Number Four, Privet Drive. There was a movement from behind her, and Hermione Granger stepped out, tears streaking down her face. Minerva set a hand on her shoulder.

"We have..." she glanced over at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and looked away, as though she could not bear to see their grief a moment longer, "we have several more students missing, Albus."

Albus watched her. 'Several' meant more than two, which meant that Harry and Ron had possibly run into trouble before they even made it to the Chamber of Secrets. "Who?" he asked.

"Harry Potter, Ron W-Weasley, and Neville Longbottom," she answered, keeping her eyes fixed on his. Mrs. Weasley screamed and fell into one of the armchairs Albus had conjured for the Weasleys. Hermione sobbed, and fresh tears tracked down her face.

"I-I-I didn't even n-notice they were m-m-missing," she said through sobs, "not until a f-few m-minutes before P-Professor M-M-McGonagall came in."

"It's true, Albus," McGonagall said. "They are not in the dorms, nor have they been seen in the dorms or common room all this afternoon."

Mr. Weasley drew himself up to his full height. "What exactly do you think is happening?"

Albus suddenly felt very old. "Arthur," he said quietly.

But the other man – who now had two children missing – ignored him. "I think we deserve to know. Is there any possible way that Harry Potter is opening the Chamber of Secrets?"

"Harry wouldn't!" Hermione cried. "He wouldn't. He isn't the Heir of Slytherin, I know he isn't."

“He has shown that he has skills beyond a second year,” Arthur pressed. “And he speaks Parseltongue, like Slytherin. I saw his face when he looked at that Umbridge woman; he was not only angry, he wanted to kill her.”

“I don’t believe he wanted to kill her,” Albus lied. “He had just had some very nasty allegations leveled at him. Both he and your son did.”

“A-and Harry just s-s-studies more!” Hermione said, her face bright red.

“Hermione,” Arthur said. “I appreciate your loyalty to your friend, but if you have seen anything suspicious, anything at all, you need to tell me now.”

She shook her head silently. Albus wanted to applaud her. Obviously, the three time travelers had loved this one so desperately for good reason. Loyal and brave, a true Gryffindor. He glanced over at where Fawkes still stood on his perch. He had thought he’d seen the phoenix move out of the corner of his eye, but that had only been wishful thinking.

“Where were you when you last saw them?” Arthur asked.

“It was r-right after Transfiguration,” she answered at once.

“Why did they leave you?”

“They... they said they had a detention with Professor Snape,” she said. Albus closed his eyes.

“Did you see them leave for the dungeons?” Minerva asked.

“No,” she answered, “they ran off.”

“Albus,” Minerva turned to him. “I am quite certain that Weasley and Potter did not have detention with Professor Snape today. We had our staff meeting for the teachers this morning, and he did not say a word about it. He generally gloats.”

“Perhaps they forgot the day,” Albus murmured, though he knew that this was not nearly enough to halt what was now going to happen. *Harry, where are you?*

“This was right after Transfiguration?” Minerva asked sharply. “Right before Ginny Weasley was taken into the Chamber?”

“Yes,” Hermione said hesitantly.

“Which direction did they run off to?”

“The... they ran toward the Hospital Wing,” she said reluctantly.

“Which is also the direction of that bathroom,” Arthur said. His face slowly flushed to a bright red. Molly’s sobs were slowing and she finally looked up. Her brown eyes flashed with anger and grief.

“I t-t-told you,” Hermione said bravely. “Harry would *never* hurt G-G-Ginny. And Ron would be the last person to hurt his sister!”

“Unless he had his will taken away,” Molly said sharply. “Potter knows about the Imperius Curse – it could be another spell he practices on Ron.”

Silence fell over the headmaster’s office, and Albus wanted to put his head in his hands. He had only one ally in this room – one person who did not, on some level, suspect Harry – and she was only thirteen years old. Fawkes trilled. It was a sound that usually had the ability to comfort him beyond anything else. But now it made him uneasy and wary, because Fawkes should have been gone hours ago.

“Where was Harry on the night of Halloween?” Arthur asked.

“He was in the common room,” she answered.

“In the common room,” he said flatly. “Why wasn’t he at the feast?”

“He... he said he didn’t feel well,” Hermione said. “Ginny didn’t feel well either.”

Albus stared at the girl, willing her to remain strong, willing her trust in Harry not to break. The other adults exchanged significant looks. He did not want to remain silent any longer. But he could not possibly tell them why he trusted Harry, Ron, and Ginny beyond all doubt. It was far, far too soon; all of them knew it.

“He had enough time –“

“—That explains why they were both –“

“—If he’s hurt Ron and Ginny, I’ll –“

“We’ll get to the bottom of this, I assure you –“

“Thank you, Minerva –“

“—When he returns to the common room, I’ll ensure that he gives us satisfactory answers... Miss Granger?”

Hermione started, and looked away. They both had been completely silent while the others had damned Harry. The evidence they had – going by what they had seen and witnessed – was damning, he had to admit. If Harry did not return, Albus feared that he would be remembered as the student who had killed several others. Albus closed his eyes again, feeling, for the first time since he was eighteen years old, utterly impotent.

“Return to your common room,” Minerva said. “Come straight back to us if Potter returns, do you understand?”

“He didn’t do –“

“Miss Granger! You have never been one to directly disobey an order from a teacher, do *not* start tonight,” Minerva threatened, her lips a thin line.

Hermione left, closing the door quietly behind her.

“Harry Potter is not opening the Chamber of Secrets,” Dumbledore said firmly.

“How can you possibly believe that he isn’t?” Molly flared up at once. “*Everything* points to it. His mysterious absence from the feast on Halloween, his knowledge of advanced spells, the fact that he made Ron run with him *right before my daughter was taken into the Chamber!* How can you *possibly* believe otherwise?”

“You don’t even know Potter,” Minerva pointed out. “You’ve only spoken to him once.”

“Yes,” Albus admitted, “right after he saved the Philosopher’s Stone from Lord Voldemort.”

“This has nothing to do with You-Know-Who,” Arthur said.

It has everything to do with Voldemort.

He stared around at them and felt the horrible certainty that things were going to get worse – a lot worse – before they got better. If Harry managed to save Ginny, if he was not dead, then suspicion would be deflected. But what he saw on these people’s faces was not momentary. It had its roots in that damn article. The shadow of the Chosen One’s terrible power was like a presence in the room, feeding the distrust until it became surety. It would not go away, not really, until the truth was told, which would, unfortunately, be years. That is, if Harry survived this night.

What is happening?

As soon as the thought crossed his mind, Fawkes let out a loud cry. He spread his graceful wings the color of flame, leapt into the air, grabbed the Sorting Hat from its shelf, and disappeared in a bright flash of fire.

Chapter 11 – Just a Memory

Harry blinked. He stared down at a filthy ground covered in – bones? He moved his hand, and it squelched in the muck. *What the --?* As soon as the thought struck, he felt a wave of dizziness crash over him, a great vast thing that started at his head and pushed with unrelenting force. He barely managed to turn his head in time to avoid spraying his own hands with vomit. He heaved and heaved while his stomach clenched painfully.

“Harry?” Ron’s voice.

“Lockhart... Ron! He’s bleeding from his ears,” Neville said. “What’d you *do* to him?”

“Just stunned him,” Ron said indifferently. “Might be more powerful because I used two wands.”

Harry retched. The voices sounded as though they came from very far away, as though he were underwater. *What is going on?* Why were he and Ron and Neville in a place littered with the remains of small animals and smelled like an open sewage pipe? He dropped onto his forearms and threw up again.

“Harry,” Ron said urgently. “Get up, come on.”

“Ron,” Neville said with a shaky voice, “Lockhart needs help –“

“Lockhart,” Ron said viciously, “is lucky that I didn’t kill him. He just Obliviated Harry!”

“Where are we?” Harry rasped.

Ron swore. “We’re in the Chamber of Secrets – near it, anyway.”

“What?” Harry said blankly.

“The *Chamber of Secrets!*” Ron said desperately. “You don’t remember – you don’t effing remember!” He walked over and kicked Lockhart in the shins. Hard. Neville squeaked.

"I'm – I c-c-can't," and Harry hated how thin his voice sounded. The tidal wave of nausea closed over him, and he squeezed his eyes shut.

"Wake up! Wake up!" Ron was yelling in his ear and slapping his cheeks.

"Ron?" Harry asked. Somehow he had lain down on the ground... but he'd only blinked, hadn't he? To keep from vomiting again? "Stop hitting me. I just blinked."

"You didn't just blink," Ron said. "You've been out for Merlin knows how long..."

"About half an hour," Neville said helpfully.

"Listen," Ron said. "Pull yourself together. My sister needs you!"

"*Ginny's* in here?" He tried to get up, but his legs felt limp. Instead, he gripped Ron's robes and pulled himself up halfway. "How'd she get here? Why? What'd we do?"

"Damn it, Harry!" Ron snarled. He lifted Harry up by his robes, set him on his feet, and shook him like a rag doll. "*Lockhart Obliviated you!*"

Was that why his brain felt like someone had taken a hammer to it? He was supposed to be here, he just forgot? He took several deep breaths. Now that he wasn't so close to the floor, he found it easier to breathe. Lockhart – their Defense professor, who was completely useless but was too, well, stupid to be a threat – had Obliviated him?

"Ron," Harry said in a low voice, flicking his eyes toward Neville, who was bent over a still form – Professor Lockhart. "*Ginny's* in there?"

"You remember Ginny?" Ron said cautiously.

"I'll *a/ways* remember Ginny," Harry said quietly. He knew Ron would get it.

Ron moaned with relief. "Thank Merlin," he said. "I didn't know how much he'd taken from you... I was going barmy." He sagged against

the wall of the tunnel as though his legs were barely supporting him. Harry knew the feeling.

“What’s in here?” Harry asked.

“A basilisk,” Ron said. “That’s a giant snake – see that skin over there? That’s where it came from. Don’t look at it. It’ll kill you. And its fangs are poisonous, too.”

Harry gaped at him. “And Ginny’s in there with it?” Why hadn’t they tried to stop this from happening? What kind of horrible mistake had they made?

“Harry...” Ron sounded quite desperate. “You’ve got to *go*.”

“Aren’t” – Harry licked his lips – “Aren’t you coming with me?”

“I can’t! I don’t speak Parseltongue,” Ron said.

“What the hell is Parseltongue?” Harry asked. He was trembling now, whether it was from fear or confusion, he did not know.

“You can talk to snakes,” Neville said, once Ron’s silence made it clear that he could not speak at the moment. “That’s how we got down here. You hissed something... Ron said it was ‘open.’ But,” he said seriously, “you don’t have to go alone, Harry, I’ll go with you.”

Ron’s fist slammed against the wall. “No. No, you’re staying here with me. I’ve got to keep an eye on Lockhart.”

“B-b-but I c-could go with Harry,” Neville said. His face appeared completely bloodless in the flickering light coming from the two wands Ron held in his hands. “You can handle him if he wakes up.”

“Exactly,” Ron said. “You’re going to keep me from killing him if he wakes up.”

“I have to go alone?” Harry asked. There was a hint of a plea in his voice that he hated. But he had no idea where he was, and what to do. How were basilisks defeated? He glanced down at his wand. Was there a spell that Lockhart had made him forget?

"Yeah," Ron said. "You speak Parseltongue," he added lamely. Harry gazed at him for long moments; his best mate's blue eyes were wide. He was furious, Harry realized. He had obviously not been joking when he'd told Neville that the other boy would have to stop him from killing Lockhart. "Listen," he dragged Harry further up the tunnel, away from Neville, who was staring at them. "There's a diary," he whispered, "it's like the locket, like the cup. *Do you understand?*"

So not only was there a basilisk in there with Ginny, but a Horcrux as well?

"All right," Harry nodded. It served to shake out the rest of the cobwebs in his head, but he could almost feel the blankness there. "I'm going. Any other words of advice?"

"Uh," Ron said. "Please hurry?"

Harry set off down the tunnel at once. Neville said something, but Harry didn't respond. Nor did he look back. Ginny was somewhere up ahead, at the mercy of both a basilisk and a Horcrux. Once he could no longer hear Ron's and Neville's voices, he paused to empty his stomach once more. He rested his head against the smooth, wet stone for a moment. Then, every limb shaking – from nerves or anger, he couldn't tell – he continued on.

Further and further he went, until he came to a round door engraved with snakes. They almost seemed to move. Harry eyed it. If he could talk to snakes, could he talk to fake snakes, too? They almost seemed alive. Their eyes gleamed at him.

"*Open*," he said. It sounded like a hiss. He was not surprised to see that it slid out of the way, revealing the vast room beyond. Wand pointed straight in front of him, he entered. He was in a long hallway. He looked up, and could not see the ceiling. Columns stretched up and up into darkness. He walked steadily forward, and saw that the room eventually opened up. There was a large statue of a man, and laying facedown before it was Ginny, her hair gleaming like fire. He sprinted toward her, and his footsteps echoed, sounding like he was leading an army. But it was only him.

He knelt beside her and gently turned her over. *Don't be dead, don't be dead, don't be dead, don't be dead...* he pleaded over and over again to whomever might be listening. "Ginny..." he muttered. She was alive; she looked as though she was sleeping. Her chest rose and fell steadily, and her cheeks were a bit flushed.

He shook her shoulder. "Ginny!" he said desperately. "Wake up! Wake up!"

Something made him turn around. He thought he'd heard a sound, like someone else was here with them. All he saw was a shadow that somehow seemed malevolent. It seemed like it was breathing...

He pointed his wand at her. "*Ennervate!*" he said loudly. But still, she remained unconscious. He could not imagine what had made him think she was sleeping – her unnatural stillness was just as frightening as the shadow. Next to her was a small black book. It was the diary that Ron had mentioned... the Horcrux. He picked it up, and stared at it with loathing. *This* was somehow doing it to her, he knew it. He racked his memories, trying to recall if he had ever seen a Horcrux act in this manner. It had changed Ron; had fed his negativity and had contributed to him leaving Harry and Hermione alone. But he hadn't known it could do this... and even if it had, he'd been Obliviated.

He paced back and forth, and time marched on with agonizing speed. He examined his memories, and grew ever more furious when he came upon blank spots. He remembered the Horcruxes – all of them but this diary – but he could not remember how some of them had been destroyed. He knew that Fiendfyre could do it. But when he thought back to Hufflepuff's cup, and how it had been destroyed, he came up blank. Same with the ring, in the first timeline – Dumbledore had done it, but how?

He had no idea how much time had passed. He suspected it had been a long time... too long. He looked down at Ginny, and his heart leapt into his throat. Her cheeks were pale, now, and her breathing had become faint. *I'm going to screw this up*, he thought. *And Ginny's going to die.*

He stroked her hair. He was tempted to unleash Fiendfyre and destroy the diary, but he had no way of controlling the vicious flames.

“Harry Potter.”

A boy about sixteen years old had stepped out of the shadows. *No*, Harry blinked. *He didn't step out of the shadows... the shadow was him all along...* And the shadows still clung to him, as if the boy before him was more smoke than flesh.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Tom Riddle,” the boy said.

Voldemort. Harry gaped at him. “What – what are you doing here?” he asked.

“That’s an interesting question,” *Voldemort* said. “But I’m afraid that it’s your turn to answer some questions. Questions I’ve had since that stupid little girl began writing in me.”

“Sorry,” Harry said recklessly. “I’m not really in the mood.” He pointed his wand straight at the Horcrux that was somehow becoming flesh. He looked down at Ginny again. She seemed even paler and weaker... while the Horcrux grew stronger. *He’s stealing her life!*

Voldemort laughed. It was a high, cold sound that had resonated in Harry’s dreams for almost two decades. He had laughed just the same way after he had killed Harry’s parents...

“You can’t kill me with your wand, Potter,” he said. “And unless you want to hasten your own death, by all means, I can call the basilisk, and you can finally die.” *Is that how I can speak Parseltongue?* Harry asked himself. *Voldemort can speak Parseltongue, and since I’m a Horcrux, I can too?*

“Fine,” Harry said.

“She told me all about you, you know,” *Voldemort* said. “How the greatest sorcerer ever lived was defeated by a baby. You. Tell me how.”

"My mother died for me," Harry told him after a moment. He clutched his wand, mentally cataloguing the spells that might work against a basilisk. But if he couldn't look at it without risking death, like Ron had said, how could he aim? "And you aren't the greatest wizard in the world, Voldemort, Albus Dumbledore is."

Riddle opened his mouth, perhaps to ask how Harry had known who he was, when the most beautiful sound he had ever heard filled the Chamber. It was phoenix song, and for the first time since he had left Ron and Neville, Harry felt a measure of hope. Fawkes was here...

The phoenix dropped something misshapen and lumpy at Harry's feet. He recognized it at once: the Sorting Hat. "Uh, thanks, Fawkes," he said. Fawkes trilled and spread his beautiful wings and soared back up into the darkness.

Harry watched Voldemort as he laughed. The truth be told, Harry had no idea why Fawkes had seen fit to bring him the Sorting Hat; he could not see the possible use in this situation. But... perhaps Dumbledore had sent Fawkes. Maybe there was a note in there that described how best to kill basilisks, or maybe how to control Fiendfyre... Harry examined the Sorting Hat while Voldemort continued to laugh. There was nothing there, nothing.

"Well," Voldemort said. "If that's the best the old man can do... Time to die, Potter."

Harry glanced down at Ginny. He didn't know how he could possibly do it, but he couldn't fail her. *Always and always*. He tore his eyes away from her as Voldemort called the basilisk.

"*Kill him*," he said in a sibilant voice.

Harry ran. He ran to put distance between himself and Ginny, to draw the basilisk away from her. He could hear it sliding behind him, and the faint splashes as more and more of it came out of the pool of water that had surrounded the statue. It seemed endless. If he could just get behind one of the columns, he had about one good chance... he might try *Sectumsempra*, and cut off its head before its eyes could kill him. Or its fangs...

A stream of light flew over Harry as he ran headlong for the columns. *Fawkes*. He heard another trill, this one angry instead of comforting, and the basilisk shrieked. The sound sent ripples of fear down his entire body. He had never known that a snake could make such a sound, and he hoped never to hear it again.

He was almost where he could send off one good spell when he tripped and fell hard on the unforgiving surface. His vision blurred when he hit his jaw on a rock. And he watched with horror when his wand flew out of his grasp, and rolled away. Whatever *Fawkes* had done to the basilisk, it had not stopped it for long. He could hear the impossibly long body gliding on the floor.

"Kill him, you stupid beast!" Voldemort shouted. *"Use your fangs!"*

Harry hoped this meant that *Fawkes* had taken out its eyes. He stared at where his wand had been thrown, but he could not see it from this angle, and judging by the loud slither, he did not have time to grab it. He had one last chance.

He jammed the Sorting Hat down on his head, and thought "HELP!" as loud as he could. Perhaps Dumbledore could hear him... he could save Ginny even if Harry could not.

Something heavy came out of the Sorting Hat, landing on top of his head with enough force to blacken the edges of his vision. He ripped the hat off his head, grabbed whatever it was, and rolled over onto his back. He took a quick look at what the Sorting Hat had given him, and with a surge of hope, he saw that it was a sword. The hope changed to fierce determination when he sensed the shadow of the basilisk looming over him.

He got up on one knee – that was all he had time for – and grasping the sword in both hands, he lifted it. The huge maw of the basilisk opened before him, and he caught a quick look at the glistening fangs before he thrust the sword up. He felt resistance, and he pushed with all his might. His arms quivering with effort, he chanced a glance up, and saw the tip of the sword protruding from the tip of the basilisk's head, right between two bleeding eye sockets. He yanked as hard as he could and rolled away at the same time.

He almost made it. A fang punched into his arm, and pain immediately tore through his body. The basilisk convulsed as it died, and lodged the fang in deeper. Harry took great gasps of air, and with all of his will-power, ripped it out of his arm.

“NO!” Voldemort shouted.

Harry staggered to his feet, sword still in hand, and kept his eyes on Ginny’s hair. He weakened with each step, but he forced himself to continue. When he could no longer walk, he crawled, while Voldemort laughed.

And then Harry could no longer move. He closed his eyes, and he could feel tears seep out from behind his eyelids. Something heavy landed on his back, but he had no strength to dislodge it. Everything became fuzzy, and there was a ringing in his ears like the whistle of a train...

But then, amidst the burning agony of where the fang had punctured his arm, he felt cool moisture and the pain receded. The whistle, which had grown louder, faded once more, and Harry was able to open his eyes.

“Get away from him, bird!”

The weight lifted off his back, and Harry stood on strengthened legs. He was only five feet from Ginny, and as soon as he saw the diary, he knew what to do. It was his only chance... if this sword did not destroy the Horcrux, then Harry had no other options.

“STOP!”

But he ignored Voldemort, lifted the sword when he was still three feet away, and plunged it down, cleaving the diary in two. There was a terrible scream, and Harry turned his head as the Riddle that had come out of the diary disappeared.

He sat down, and gently pulled Ginny into his lap. “Please wake up,” he murmured, “please wake up, please wake up...” Tears trickled down his cheeks as long moments that seemed to stretch forever went by.

Finally, she stirred. “Harry,” she sighed, blinking her eyes open.

“I thought you were dead,” he said.

She sat up, apparently none the worse for wear, although seconds ago Harry had feared that she would die. She frowned at him. “Are you crying? Aren’t I the one supposed to be doing that?”

“I thought you were going to die... I didn’t know if I could save you...” he told her. Then he pressed kisses on every inch of her face that he could reach. She squeaked when he hit an open eye.

“Harry, you knew I would be safe,” she said. “You’re trembling!” she sounded as though she couldn’t believe it. “Last time, you weren’t nearly so —“

“I don’t remember last time,” Harry said. She stared at him, eyes wide with shock. “Lockhart Obliviated me. Ron told me. I came in here and saw you... you were dying, and I had no idea what I could possibly do.”

“Lockhart?” Ginny asked.

“You’ll have to ask Ron and Neville the details,” Harry said. “There are huge blank spots in my memory... *Why* did we let this happen, Ginny?”

Ginny looked at the sword he’d thrown aside when he’d destroyed the diary. “We needed that sword, Harry. Badly enough to let this happen again. It destroys Horcruxes now. We need it. When we first started planning to come back, Dumbledore told us that to attempt to destroy them, we couldn’t rely on Fiendfyre. Especially when we have to kill the snake, and destroy the cup.”

He sighed. He felt exhausted all of a sudden. He pressed a kiss to her hair. “From now on, we fight side by side,” he said firmly.

She smiled at him. “When we can. But I’ll tell you this: I’m not going to do this again. Ever.”

“No, you aren’t.”

She sighed, and put her head on his shoulder. They sat like that until Harry felt his legs falling asleep. "We have to go," Harry murmured. "Ron will be going spare... I have no idea how long I've been here. Hours, probably."

"What were you doing?" she asked.

"Apparently waiting for a phoenix to bring me an old hat," he said dryly. She stood and grasped his hand, pulling him to his feet. He bent over and picked up what remained of the Horcrux and the sword. He looked at it, and wrinkled his nose, "couldn't we have just *bought* a sword?"

Ginny laughed. "It's Gryffindor's sword, Harry. You can't just buy it. You have to prove that you're courageous, and that you've got nerve."

"I don't think I've ever felt less brave in my life," Harry said.

"That's probably why you got it."

They made their way quickly through the Chamber. Ginny held the diary, and Harry held the sword. Fawkes glided silently above them, making it unnecessary to light one of their wands. It seemed to take much longer than it had. They heard Ron shouting before they even came close to seeing him. Either Ron was yelling very loud, or the acoustics in the tunnel were amazing. Harry suspected it might be both.

"We're here!" Harry called.

Then, instead of shouting, he heard footsteps running toward him and saw faint, bobbing lights. Ron ran fast, and he gripped first Ginny, and then Harry, in a bone-crushing hug. "I thought you were dead!"

"Almost," Harry said.

"You've been gone for almost three hours!"

"Where's Lockhart?" Ginny asked.

“Back there, with Neville,” Ron said.

Suddenly, Harry felt a rage so intense that it frightened him. Without looking at the other two, he strode ahead, wand raised. Lockhart had taken away his memories, had violated Harry, and had nearly ruined everything. He raised the sword as soon as he saw him. Neville gasped, “Harry?”

Harry wanted to kill Lockhart very badly. He stared at the man for almost a minute. He was lying very still and motionless. “Is he dead?”

“N-no,” Neville said. “He even woke up... but he keeps going back to sleep. I-I’ve been trying to... you know, help him.”

Harry did not like knowing that he probably would have killed Lockhart had Neville not been there. He lowered his wand and the sword. Neville could not possibly understand. He did not know of the time travel, did not know that Lockhart could have destroyed everything. It was only luck that Harry had retained his memories; he remembered very clearly that Lockhart had intended – the first time – to destroy Ron’s and Harry’s minds. But Neville could not possibly know, and Harry felt ashamed when Neville looked at him with something like fear.

“Sorry, Neville,” Harry said. “He... he really scrambled my brains.”

Neville looked so relieved that Harry felt even guiltier. “That’s okay, Harry,” he said.

Fawkes flew around a corner in the tunnel, and Neville gaped at him. “Is that a *phoenix*?”

“Yeah,” Harry chuckled a little. “He saved my life.”

Ginny and Ron came around the corner then; Neville sighed with relief. “W-we thought you were dead,” he said. “Both of you. You were gone for so long...”

“We’re fine,” Ginny’s voice shook. Harry looked closer and saw that there were tears in her eyes. “I don’t know how we’re g-going to get

b-back, though.” She glared at Lockhart’s prone shape, and Harry realized that her tears were more from anger than anything else.

“Phoenixes are supposed to be really strong,” Neville said tentatively. “Maybe this one can help us. I dunno how it’ll manage Lockhart, though.”

“Can we leave him down here?” Ron asked. He laughed; apparently Ron had worked through his anger. The fact that Harry and Ginny were safe probably helped.

It took the combined effort of Ron, Harry, and Neville to carry Lockhart to the pipe that led back to Hogwarts. Ron dropped his feet with a curse. They lined up behind Harry and the phoenix. Ginny gripped his hand; Ron gripped his sister’s shoulder and, with extreme reluctance, picked up one of Lockhart’s feet again. Neville kept his hand under Lockhart’s armpit.

Without further ado, Harry grasped one of Fawkes’ tail feathers. He felt unbelievably light, and then they were soaring up and up through the pipe, and it took what seemed like no time at all to find themselves in a familiar looking bathroom.

“Didn’t Dumbledore say that he’d be in his office?” Harry asked for Neville’s benefit.

“Yeah,” Ron said, “I think we’re supposed to follow that phoenix.”

Harry reluctantly dropped Ginny’s hand, and they followed Fawkes into the dimly lit corridor.

“Harry,” Ron said. “Help us with this git.”

Harry sighed and doubled back to grab the arm that Neville did not hold. It seemed to take forever, and by the time they reached the gargoyle, Harry’s back was one massive ache. He thought several times about just dropping Lockhart and letting him be. With every step that Harry took, the resentment of having his mind violated grew. While he knew that *Obliviate* was useful, when used as a weapon for greed it was nearly as bad as the Imperius Curse.

As soon as they stepped on to the moving staircase that led to Dumbledore's office, Harry dropped Lockhart with a huge sigh of relief. The relief faded quickly when he heard raised voices. They were muffled by the heavy oak door, but he could hear Mrs. Weasley's voice, and Mr. Weasley's, and a lower, steadier voice, that was almost certainly Dumbledore's.

"—DON'T CARE ABOUT A PHOENIX!"

"That's Mum," Ron whispered, his eyes wide.

"—HE TOOK OUR DAUGHTER, AND OUR SON! AND I AM NOT STANDING HERE A MOMENT LONGER!"

Harry had the horrible suspicion that Mrs. Weasley was not talking about Tom Riddle. He took a deep breath. He was about to push it open, when footsteps rushed toward him from the other side, and the door crashed open.

He stared at Mrs. Weasley, who looked thoroughly disheveled, and her eyes narrowed in anger and fear the moment her attention was caught by the scar on his forehead. The instant before she sent a hex at him (Harry knew the signs), she caught sight of her children, who stood and stared silently at her, looks of shock written clearly across their faces.

"Ginny... Ron..." she whispered faintly. "What...?"

Ginny burst into tears, and Harry had no idea if she was acting or not. He didn't look at her, but skirted around Mrs. Weasley and entered the room. "Lockhart's hurt," he said.

Mr. Weasley and Professor McGonagall simply stared at him, mouths open in shock. He could imagine the picture he made – he was covered in muck and blood, his robes were torn, and he carried a sword in one hand and a wand in the other. With an effort, Harry turned away from Mr. Weasley, whose look of extreme anger had melted into bewilderment when Ron, Ginny, and Neville came in behind him. Dumbledore was beaming at him, and he looked at Harry with pride, relief, and concern.

Ginny still cried, and had her face hidden in her robes.

“I think...” McGonagall said weakly, clutching her chest. “I think we need an explanation.”

Harry glanced at Ron. There was no way that he could explain anything, not with the gaping holes in his memory.

So Ron spun the lie that they had practiced over and over again. He told them how Harry had heard voices in the walls, but they’d written it off as Harry being injured. Then, he told them that they’d begun to suspect something was wrong at the school when the Chamber was opened, and the first message was left on the walls. And after the two students had been petrified, and Harry had admitted to hearing that voice again, Ron said that he thought of a basilisk. It was a snake, and since Harry was the only Parseltongue in the school, he was the only one who could hear it. They didn’t tell their other friends, because they weren’t sure, but Harry had heard the voice again just that afternoon. They’d lied and said that they had detention with Snape, but really they had been following the voice that came from the walls.

Harry kept his eyes on Dumbledore, ready to interrupt Ron if he said anything that would be known for a lie. But Dumbledore only nodded his head every once in a while. He didn’t believe a word of it – he knew the truth – but the lies sounded enough like truth to make it believable.

“Then,” Ron said firmly, “we heard Professor McGonagall say that Ginny’d entered some girls’ bathroom, and we reckoned that the Chamber of Secrets was in there. So we went, and ran into Neville and Lockhart on the way, and they came with us. Then Harry made the sinks move when he talked to them in Parseltongue, and there was a tunnel...”

“That is all very well and good, Mr. Weasley,” said McGonagall, who had apparently recovered from the shock. “But it was very irresponsible of you not to alert a teacher.”

Ron looked pointedly at Lockhart. "He's the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher," he said reasonably. Neville looked at him quickly, but then looked away.

McGonagall narrowed her eyes at him. She refrained from saying what they all knew she wished to say but asked, instead, "And why are you being so quiet, Mr. Potter?"

"Because Lockhart Obliviated me," Harry said quietly.

"Yeah," Ron said. "We were already in the tunnel, when Lockhart knocked Neville over and stole his wand. Before I could do anything, he stole all of Harry's memories. Then Harry was really sick..."

Dumbledore looked at Harry sharply with a question in his eyes. Harry shook his head an infinitesimal amount. He sat back. "I take it you remember everything from that point on?"

"Yes," Harry said. And then it was his turn to talk. He told them everything, and he only omitted the knowledge of the Horcruxes that he had from the future, and his reaction to Ginny waking up. Everyone sat in rapt silence – even Ron and Neville. "So I did the only thing I hadn't tried yet... she was holding it in her hands... and I used the sword to cut it in half. The shadow of Voldemort disappeared, and Ginny woke up."

"I'm s-s-sorry!" Ginny cried. "I didn't... I didn't know!"

"It is quite all right, Miss Weasley," Dumbledore said quietly. "Strong, adult wizards have been enchanted by Voldemort as well. There was no lasting damage done... I expect that Madam Pomfrey will have the Mandrake Potion ready in no time... there will be no punishment. I expect that a stay in the Hospital Wing for tonight will suffice... and perhaps some hot chocolate?"

Ginny nodded. "Thank you."

The Weasleys left, all except Ron, who was glaring at Lockhart again. Harry could tell that he wanted to give the prone professor a good kick. Harry was actually starting to feel a little worried about the

professor – had Ron killed him with the force of two wands casting the Stunning Spell?

“Professor McGonagall,” Dumbledore said, “I think Gilderoy needs attention from the Hospital Wing. If you could...”

She nodded sharply, and used her wand to levitate Lockhart gently. “I’ll leave you to deal with Potter, Weasley, and Longbottom.”

“Mr. Longbottom,” Dumbledore said, “it is my belief that you went along for the ride. You may go tell the others in Gryffindor Tower what has happened here this night.”

Neville nodded. “Thank you, Professor,” he said quietly.

“Mr. Longbottom,” Dumbledore added. “For your bravery and willingness to help a fellow student and friend – one hundred points to Gryffindor.”

They waited a few moments after Neville left, just to be sure that he was out of earshot. Then Ron’s anger exploded with the force of a small bomb.

“That effing idiot Obliviated Harry!” he shouted. His face matched his hair. “I thought... I thought... I thought that Harry had been wiped senseless, like Lockhart did to himself last time. He was sick, and then he passed out for a half an hour! He had no idea where he was, what he was doing...”

“And you remember everything?” Dumbledore said. “Everything besides the Chamber, that is?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “But there are holes in my memory in other places – Ginny said that we used the sword to destroy Horcruxes? And that was the reason why we did this?”

“Thank Merlin,” Ron said. “I was going barmy. I think I might have to apologize to Neville.”

“I told Ginny,” Harry said solidly. “And this counts for you too, Ron. I told her that there may be things that I’ve got to do on my own, but

the rest of the time I want you there. No more using each other as bait.”

“I agree,” Dumbledore said quietly.

“When I fight, you fight,” Ron said. “And when you fight, I fight. Mostly, anyway.”

“Always and always,” Harry said.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

The days slid by quickly after that, and Harry felt such an overwhelming feeling of peace (only punctured by the anger he felt toward Lockhart, and he was able to express that fully when he was alone with Ginny and Ron, who were even angrier than he was), that many people remarked upon his good mood. He threw himself with renewed fervor into the small group he had started with Neville, Hermione, Luna, Ron, and Ginny. Things were progressing there even better than ever.

Hermione, who had run up to him at the feast after Harry had slain the basilisk and thrown her arms around him and Ron, had been extremely upset about what she called “unfounded accusations.” Apparently she had, at some point, spoken to the Weasleys, Dumbledore, and McGonagall while Harry was in the Chamber. The fact that adults she trusted were willing to believe the worst in Harry had prompted her to newer heights in her spell-casting ability.

Neville was also very enthusiastic about learning in the Room of Requirement. And if he sometimes stared at Harry and Ron with a perplexed look on his face, Harry brushed it off as an unfortunate side effect of almost murdering Lockhart in front of him. Luna, however, approached the baby Dumbledore’s Army with the same not-quite-attentiveness that she did everything else.

And, even better than all of that, Lucius Malfoy had attended another of the Slytherin Quidditch games. And he’d brought Dobby. He’d brushed by Malfoy, passed the sock Harry had taken off when he’d noticed the white blond hair, and Malfoy, predictably, had thrown it... and Dobby had caught it. He’d laughed at Malfoy’s threats, and told

him they were even. Then he had walked away, a stunned and happy Dobby following him.

The only worry that steadily grew on Harry's mind as April died was the fact that Sirius Black had not attempted to contact Harry.

He knew he was out. Dumbledore had confirmed it. Kingsley Shacklebolt, an old friend of his and hopefully a future friend of Harry's, had been the one to take his release papers to Azkaban. He'd seen him, given him all the information he'd need to reenter society as a free man, went with him to Gringott's to reopen his account, found him lodgings at the Leaky Cauldron, and had promised to return the next day.

By the time he'd returned, Sirius had already disappeared.

"Have you found Sirius yet?" Harry asked half-heartedly in the middle of May. He'd asked Dumbledore every time they met in the Room of Requirement.

"Not yet," Dumbledore shook his head.

"This isn't like Sirius," Ginny murmured. "I would've thought he'd be pounding on the doors of Hogwarts, demanding to see Harry, the day after he was released."

"Maybe Sirius is a little barmier this time around," Ron muttered.

"May I try to find him?" Snape said snidely.

"NO!" four people shouted.

"I will continue doing everything I can," Dumbledore said. "I've set a ward around Grimmauld Place; it'll alert me if he goes anywhere near it. I've got... contacts watching for him, mainly Mundungus Fletcher."

"Did Remus say anything when you interviewed him for the job?" Harry asked desperately. Unfortunately, this was the third time he had asked, and he knew that the answer was no.

"No, Harry," Dumbledore said patiently. "Remus was quite... unwilling to talk about Sirius at all, in fact." He had enough tact not to mention the fact that he had already told Harry this several times.

"Damn it," Harry said loudly. He wanted to kick something. He looked around and saw a simple vase sitting on a table he had not noticed. Without hesitating, he seized it and threw it against the wall. It shattered gratifyingly... Harry wondered if the Room of Requirement had amplified the sound a little...

"Harry, I assure you that he will not be able to hide for long," Dumbledore said.

"He hid from the Ministry for almost two years," Ginny pointed out. "Before he went to Grimmauld Place."

"He wasn't hiding from me."

"Just... find him," Harry pleaded. "We need him."

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Authors Note:

Hi, everyone! Year Two is officially over... the next chapter will pick up with Harry about to enter his third year. I hope it is clear now that our time travelers are playing for real, and the stakes are high. Admit it... this story would be pretty boring if they weren't! Just to prepare you... Year Three has some pretty bad moments in it. Not only on a physical level, but a personal one as well. That being said, Harry, Ron, and Ginny might be telling someone a little secret... or more than one person...

A few of you have expressed a little frustration with how closely I am keeping to canon. There are several reasons for this: 1) they don't want to head into unknown waters... right off the bat..., 2) I didn't particularly want to write a story where Harry defeats Voldemort in the first month of his first year, 3) I've got some fun things planned, and I

want them to all get older! Don't worry though, there will come a point in time when all bets are off.

I really enjoy having feedback. So I'm asking everyone reading to answer this question: What did you think of Pettigrew's (Harry's) trial? Everyone was so outraged by the cliff-hanger at the end of the chapter (wicked grin) that no one has mentioned it. I'm curious about what you guys think. And if you happened to hate it, please don't feel the need to spare my feelings. Every opinion counts. That being said, it isn't in there arbitrarily, I promise!

See you at the next update!

Chapter 12 – Just Friends

The Knight Bus slammed to a halt outside the small garden gate that led to the Burrow. Harry, feeling slightly queasy, pulled his trunk out with him and breathed a sigh of relief. He waved a good-bye to Stan Shunpike, and could not help but feel very thankful, as the bus lurched forward with a jolt and accelerated to an impossible speed before disappearing, that he was no longer on it.

“HARRY!”

Harry turned, grinning for the first time in what felt like months. “Ron! Ginny! Merlin, I thought that summer with the Muggles would never end.” And they were a sight for sore eyes, to be sure. Ron was even longer and lankier than when he had last seen him. Though when they were fully grown, the differences in their heights were not as significant, it still surprised Harry that he only came up to Ron’s shoulders at this point in time. He found himself eagerly anticipating his growth spurt. And Ginny... she had grown even more beautiful, and he could not look away from her face, and the sight of her long red hair falling down her back like a waterfall of fire.

Ginny hugged him and Ron clapped him on the back. “How was Egypt?” he asked them when as they lifted the heavy trunk and made their way to the familiar, oddly shaped building. Despite that he carried one-third of what felt like a massive weight (he really ought to clean out his trunk every once in a while), his entire body seemed to relax a little.

“It was great!” Ron said enthusiastically. “We learned loads of cool stuff about the Egyptian wizards – they were a barmy lot, I tell you. We got some books, too, and Bill showed us around the pyramids... the parts they won’t let Muggles or unauthorized wizards go into.”

Harry gaped at him. “Are you channeling Hermione?” he asked uncertainly.

Ginny laughed. “Ron realized that if he actually paid attention to stuff, he might find it interesting,” she reached up and playfully tousled his hair. “I think our little Ronniekins is finally growing up!”

Ron looked sheepish. "How was your summer, Harry?"

"Not bad," Harry said, shrugging. It had, in fact, been full of agonizing boredom, punctuated by sharp annoyance with Dudley, Uncle Vernon, and Aunt Petunia, and one bright flare of rage with Aunt Marge and her cruel comments about his parents. To be sure, Harry had a completely perspective this time around. The words hurt him less, and Harry had mastered deflecting Uncle Vernon's rage. But with this new distance, the outrage came from the fact that they would treat any child or young man the way they did him, with a balance of abuse and neglect. Still, he'd managed to control his temper, and he'd felt even more satisfied with the way Aunt Marge had flinched away from the look on his face than when he'd blown her up. "I almost blew up my aunt," he said, smiling slyly. "One more word, and she'd have been flying like a balloon out the window, and the Ministry would've had to come track her down and puncture her."

Ginny and Ron laughed. "You should've done it, mate," he said. "And gotten pictures."

"Yeah," Harry said. "I could've sold them to the Daily Prophet for when they wrote the article about it. Would've made a fortune."

Ron shifted his grip on the trunk, and Harry jerked forward. "I can see the headline now," he said, affecting a serious manner, quite at odds with his smirk. "Harry Potter: Savior of the Wizarding World / Future Dark Lord Blew Up Aunt in Frightening Display of Terrible Power."

"All our dire suspicions about young Harry Potter, the thirteen year old madman with the power to enslave us all, have been realized today," Ginny said seriously. "His cruel, cruel nature finally became evident when he performed harmful magic against a poor, innocent Muggle."

Harry snorted.

"This is just the first step in his grand scheme of Muggle domination," Ron continued. "We tremble to think of what may come next. If you sad fools who still reckon Harry Potter's all right still refuse to believe it, see the photos of said Muggle-bloating. They were provided by Harry Potter himself."

“Although our future Dark Lord Master was unavailable for comment,” Ginny said through giggles. “A note was attached...”

“All it said was...”

“She deserved it!” They all said in unison, even Harry. By this time, they had abandoned their attempt to carry the trunk, and were now laughing too hard to walk. As Harry succumbed to helpless laughter, he felt a bit of the tension that had built up over the summer ease a little. He remembered telling the twins once, after he had given them his Tri-Wizard Tournament winnings, that the world need laughter, Harry most especially. The joke shop would have to wait for a bit, but this was just what he needed.

And suddenly the laughter cut off abruptly, as though it had never been. Harry faltered, and saw a slightly sick look on Ginny’s face. “Hi, Mum,” she said tentatively.

Mrs. Weasley stood watching them from not ten feet away. It was plain, by the look on her face, that she had heard everything, and did not approve. Her lips were pursed. She didn’t say anything.

“Uh, Harry’s here,” Ron pointed at Harry unnecessarily.

The silence grew and swelled. “Your father,” she said in a dangerously quiet voice. “Your father has spent his entire working life trying to help Muggles.”

“Mum, we were just having a laugh,” Ginny said in a small voice.

“I’m not,” she snapped. “You have no idea what you just sounded like. You can’t possibly know; you’re too young. But I bore all my children in a time when the kind of Muggle-baiting you were talking about was actually encouraged.”

“Mum!” Ron looked incensed. “Harry’s aunt was really awful –“

“You need to buck up your ideas, young man,” she said sternly. “You don’t attack people just because you don’t like them.”

“He didn’t even attack her!”

Mrs. Weasley closed her eyes. Harry thought that she might be counting to ten. When she opened them, she looked at Harry and tried to smile, "Harry, if you wouldn't mind, I need to speak with my children. Just leave your trunk here; I'll have Arthur levitate it up for you in a bit. You look a bit peaky, dear; you might want to have a bit of a lie-down before dinner."

Harry took this to mean that he was supposed to go up to Ron's room. He glanced back at Ron and Ginny once; they did not look happy. He didn't meet any of the Weasleys inside, although he heard the twins talking loudly and happily from the kitchen. He thought about joining them, but thought it best to obey Mrs. Weasley. He wished he had an Extendable Ear...

Harry opened the door to Ron's room with more force than was strictly necessary, and was relieved to see that the camp bed was already set up. He threw himself down on it, wondering what the hell had just happened. Mrs. Weasley had never been quite this sensitive about a joke – the twins had been legendary for saying tactless things, and mocking anything with two legs, including Voldemort.

Where are you, Sirius? Harry wished that his godfather was available to talk to. Despite his growing uncertainty that Sirius would ever be able to forgive Harry for effectively causing a year and a half of unneeded time in Azkaban with the dementors, Harry longed to talk to him. Sirius may not have any clue how to bolster Harry's image and make the Wizarding world stop viewing him as a potential threat, but at least he'd have a laugh about it.

But Dumbledore, who had promised to contact Harry when he found Sirius, Muggles or not, had been silent all summer. What if he had left Britain? What if he were somewhere in Australia, or Brazil, or Sri Lanka? He could be anywhere in the world, with no interest whatsoever in meeting his godson. But that just didn't fit with the Sirius Harry used to know. Ginny was right; unless the Ripple Effect had completely changed Sirius' personality, something else was keeping him away.

"Think I should send that letter to him, Hedwig?" Harry looked over at his owl. But she was sleeping with her head tucked under her wing.

He'd written a letter to Sirius at the beginning of the summer holidays, but he had never sent it. It seemed like it was too late – he should've sent it the day of Pettigrew's trial, or when Sirius had been released. But the months had gone by, and Harry was honest enough to admit that he was a little afraid of what Sirius' reply might contain. As time passed, it seemed more and more likely that it would be a polite rejection...

Harry awoke, not realizing that he had actually fallen asleep, when Ron crashed through the door and stumped in looking extremely frustrated.

"That bad?" he asked groggily.

Ron rumbled his hair. "I don't know what's gotten into her," he said. "I feel like I don't even know my own mum anymore."

Harry stayed silent, guessing that Ron needed a moment to gather his thoughts.

"It wasn't exactly bad," he said slowly, "but it wasn't exactly good either."

"Meaning?"

"Well," he said. "She thinks that me and Ginny need to be careful what we say around you. Not" – he said when he saw the look on Harry's face – "because you're a danger, but because you're our friend. Mum says it's our duty to... help you."

"Uh," Harry said.

"You know," Ron looked even more annoyed. "To choose the right side. As if you didn't make that choice twenty years ago. She said that your experiences with the Muggles might have made you bitter."

"We can't blame them for what they don't know," Harry said reluctantly. In the small, dark corner of his soul he did. But only a tiny bit.

"Wish we could tell them," Ron sighed.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “But Dumbledore had it right. We’ve got to wait until they’ve chosen to fight.”

“Bugger free will,” Ron said sourly.

“I’m worried about Sirius,” Harry said, steering the conversation away. It did no good to dwell on things they could not change. “I wrote him a letter, you know.”

“He didn’t reply?” Ron gaped at him.

“No, I never sent it,” Harry explained. “I thought... I thought it was too late. What do you reckon?”

“I dunno, Harry,” Ron said helplessly. He paused for a long moment, “Dad’s out in the shed... he got back from work while Mum was still lecturing us. You could talk to him.”

It was a tradition begun long ago in the distant future. When Harry found himself in the need of advice, he would find Arthur Weasley in his shed – at the Burrow, at Grimmauld Place, or at Molly’s Auntie Muriel’s. He would seek him out with the pretext of bringing him a snack (Molly always seemed to know when Harry needed to talk to the older man), and he would leave feeling more relaxed.

Harry carried the heavy tray that Molly had pushed toward him out to the small shed in Auntie Muriel’s backyard. He did not want to use magic to levitate it; the physical weight somehow balanced out the figurative weight that rested on Harry’s shoulders. He was not thinking about Voldemort, for once, but he was replaying the events that had happened a week ago at Spinner’s End.

Arthur, predictably, was enchanting some Muggle contraption – Harry looked closer and saw that it was a coffee maker, and wondered what possible magical function it could have. The older, wiser wizard was fiddling with it, though he did not seem particularly attentive. Harry suspected that he had come out here knowing that Harry would need to seek him out. The Weasleys, despite being in hiding, were still very much a part of the Order of the Phoenix. And everyone knew about Pettigrew’s death.

“Uh,” Harry said. “I brought out some snacks. Molly thought you might want some.”

Arthur smiled. “Thank you, Harry. Care to join me? She’s made quite a lot.”

Harry took a bite of a bacon sandwich, and then put it aside. “Arthur...”

The other man waited patiently, chewing absentmindedly, eyes on Harry.

“I killed Wormtail,” Harry said. “I did it... on purpose. I’ve... killed before, but this time I planned it. It wasn’t... I’ve never... I’ve only ever done it to defend other people.”

Arthur chewed thoughtfully, and swallowed. “I think you did do it to defend other people, Harry.”

Harry thought so too, but doubt still lingered. “He killed Dean Thomas after his wand was taken away. And he killed Daphne Greengrass because she dared try to hide him. Neither of them was given a chance to fight back, Astoria told me. He betrayed my parents; he slaughtered Merlin knows how many Muggles, and he tortured McGonagall into insanity.”

“And it is certain that he would have killed more,” Arthur pointed out.

“But still...” Harry said. “Did he deserve —“

“Harry,” he interrupted. “It isn’t about whether anyone deserves to die. It’s far more complex than that. If we had had this discussion even ten years ago, I think my answer would have been different. But this war has changed a great many people, me included. If You-Know-Who was not trying to stomp out all the light in this world, I would be the second to say that killing is never the answer. And you would be the first.”

“You don’t think this war is... tainting us?”

“No,” Arthur said firmly. “When we have to kill, we do it to protect. We don’t have another choice; at least not one that is acceptable. Azkaban is a mockery of a prison – we haven’t been able to hold a Death Eater there for years. We don’t have nearly enough people to watch over another secure location. Unless we want to keep disabling them for a time before they fight, torture, and kill again and again, killing is necessary.”

“I’ve watched you grow up, Harry, and I know you as well as I know the sons of my flesh,” Arthur continued. “There is a huge difference between killing and murder. You know where that line in the sand is drawn better than almost anyone I’ve ever met. It isn’t in you to murder, Harry.”

“It’ll never sit easy,” Harry admitted. “Even when I have to kill You-Know-Who.”

“Exactly,” Arthur said.

“Do you think he’ll be okay with it?” Harry asked. “Me talking to him? He doesn’t know me very well...”

Ron shrugged. “So let him get to know you. I think it’ll help.”

Harry sighed. It shouldn’t be this difficult for him to go and have a talk with Ron’s father. It used to feel almost as natural as listening to Dumbledore, and asking Hermione a question about a complicated spell. Despite the pretense of bringing him out snacks, Harry had always known that Arthur Weasley was willing to listen.

“All right,” Harry said. “I suppose you’re right.”

And without letting himself change his mind, he jumped off the cot, and left the hideaway that was Ron’s room. He thundered down the stairs, pausing only when he met Ginny on the landing.

“Where are you going?” she asked. Then, in a lower voice, “did Ron tell you?”

He nodded. “I’m going to the shed... you know, to talk about Sirius.”

She smiled. "Good idea. Did you think of it all by yourself?"

"Cheeky girl," he grinned. "And no, Ron suggested it."

"Don't let me stop you, then," she said.

Harry continued on down to the kitchen. He saw it as a positive sign that Mrs. Weasley was preparing a tray, obviously meant for her husband. He watched her for a moment, bustling around the kitchen. Molly Weasley was still the warm, maternal figure that he had always known. She may not yet think of him as good as one of her own sons, but he vowed that she would someday. Whatever it took.

"Mrs. Weasley?" Harry said tentatively.

She turned and smiled at him, and it was a lot warmer a smile than the cursory one she had given a few hours ago. "Hello, Harry, dear. Did you have a nice rest?"

"I did," he admitted. "Uh... is that food?"

"It's for Arthur," she explained. "He's in his shed, working on something, even after a long day at work. If you're hungry, I can make more after I take this out to him."

"I can take it out to him," Harry offered quickly. When she hesitated, he added, "please?"

"That hungry?" she asked ruefully. "I shouldn't be surprised, with six sons. And you do look a bit skinny, dear."

"Thanks," Harry said, relieved. "And... thank you, you know, for letting me stay here before we all go to Diagon Alley."

"You're welcome, Harry," she smiled.

It took her another minute to finish preparing Arthur's snack, and soon Harry was maneuvering through the Burrow and out the back door. He walked across the slightly overgrown backyard and smiled to watch how the gnomes scattered and disappeared into their holes.

He balanced the tray on one hand, and knocked on the door, pushing it open at Arthur's "come in." He was puttering with a can opener, open delight on his face. He had a quill behind one ear, and his wand behind the other. Scraps of parchment flew in the breeze created by the open doorway.

Harry cleared his throat, and Mr. Weasley looked up, startled.

"Er," Harry said. "Mrs. Weasley... she thought you might be hungry..."

"Ah," he said. "She knows me well. Here..." he used his wand to clear a space off the crowded table. Harry put it down.

There was a long, awkward silence as Mr. Weasley stared at him expectantly. Harry felt the back of his neck flush. "Er..." Harry said. "That looks like a lot of food. Want some help?"

Harry looked at him straight in the eyes, and willed the other man to know that he wanted advice, that he needed to talk to someone. There was a moment of perfect clarity, when he saw that Mr. Weasley realized what he was asking. And then...

"I'm sure Molly is making snacks for all of you right now," he said pleasantly. "But you can take a sandwich to tide you over. It's a long walk back to the kitchen for a hungry young man."

It was kindly, gently done. Arthur Weasley had never been a cruel man, and he never would be. But it was a clear dismissal, and Harry felt a strange sensation that started somewhere in the vicinity of his stomach, traveled to his heart, slid up his throat, and ended up as a stinging sensation behind his eyes. He turned, before Mr. Weasley saw it.

"Oh, thanks," he said as casually as he could. "It is a long walk." He grabbed a sandwich, and fled.

And almost immediately bumped into Percy, dropping the sandwich he had not really even wanted in the grass.

"Sorry, Harry," Percy said. "Having a good summer?"

“Uh, yeah,” he said distractedly. His heart was beating rather fast, as if he had just spent time running.

“Are you all right?”

“Oh, yes, I’m fine,” Harry lied. “Listen... I’m going to go back and find Ron.”

Percy regarded him, his eyes questioning behind the horn-rimmed glasses. “See you at dinner, then, Harry,” he finally said.

Harry nodded, and Percy stepped around him to go into the shed. He entered, but did not shut the door all the way, leaving it open a crack. Harry stood rooted to the spot, staring at the door. He couldn’t see Percy and Mr. Weasley... they couldn’t see him...

And Percy’s voice drifted out, loud enough that he could hear every word. “Did you say something to Harry, Dad? He looked a little... upset when I saw him just now.”

Harry couldn’t seem to leave; he didn’t feel right about listening to a private conversation, but he couldn’t force himself to turn away and go back to the kitchen, or back up to Ron’s room. But as much as he didn’t want to listen, didn’t want to hear, he wanted to just as much.

“Harry wanted something from me that I didn’t feel comfortable giving him,” Mr. Weasley said after a long pause. “I didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but...”

“Dad, he saved Ginny’s life last year,” Percy said. “And I’m not stupid. I heard you and Mum talk about how awful you felt that you suspected him of hurting her and Ron.”

“You shouldn’t be listening to conversations that aren’t meant for you, son,” Mr. Weasley said firmly. Harry felt a jolt of guilt. “I’m well aware that he saved Ginny’s life, and I will be grateful for that until my dying day.”

“But?”

"I don't expect you to understand until you have children of your own," Mr. Weasley said. "But ever since they met and befriended Harry, your brother and sister have changed. In all fairness, they've changed in some good ways."

"They don't tease me," Percy said. "Or, if they do, it's not like... not like the twins."

"Which is good," Mr. Weasley admitted. "But in other ways... your mother overheard a conversation today that disturbed her very much. All three of them were laughing about torturing some Muggle woman – Harry's own aunt, I think. The children I raised would never speak so about Muggles, and I can only think that it is Harry's influence."

"The woman you're talking about," Percy said. "His own aunt locked Harry in his room last year, and put bars on his windows. They fed him through a cat flap, the twins said."

"I'm not saying that Harry doesn't have legitimate reasons," Mr. Weasley said. "And it's partly because he has such good reasons to dislike Muggles that I distrust him."

Harry closed his eyes.

"You distrust him because he's been neglected and abused?" Percy asked in disbelief.

"I distrust what might come out of that abuse," Mr. Weasley said. "Harry is not a normal thirteen year old. He's hard. I saw that at Pettigrew's trial. I'm aware that everyone knows what sort of filthy accusations that Umbridge woman made about both Harry and Ron and, believe me, your mother and I were extremely angry. But Harry just looked at her, and he wanted to kill her."

"I would've wanted to kill her, too."

"There's a large difference between thinking you want to kill someone, and actually wanting to do so," Mr. Weasley said. "I think that Harry had to exert a lot of self control to stop himself from doing it. And, as if that weren't enough, I saw the same look on Ron's face when they came back from saving Ginny from the Chamber. My son looked at

that Professor Lockhart with that same desire to kill, despite the fact that he did enough damage to him that he's still in St. Mungo's, and just as ruthlessly reined it in."

"But Dad... they both controlled themselves, they *didn't* kill Umbridge or Lockhart."

"That control is just as worrisome," Mr. Weasley said. "Where did my impulsive son learn that kind of rage? And that kind of control?"

He learned it when he knew the kind of grief that leaves a man broken, Harry thought. He learned it when he saw almost his entire family slaughtered, and when he saw his wife burned alive. He learned it the same place he found within himself the kind of strength that allowed him to risk everything for the kind of love that burns brighter and hurts more than any anger.

"Harry's still only thirteen," Percy said stubbornly. "And he's Ron's best friend. I still don't think that he has bad intentions, and he certainly hasn't done anything to deserve not being trusted. But if you're right, aren't you afraid that by rejecting him, you're going to make him harder?"

"I am not responsible for Harry," Mr. Weasley said calmly. "I am responsible for protecting my family. And if that means withholding trust until I have a better understanding of who he is, so be it. I don't dislike Harry, Perce. There may come a day when I trust Harry fully, and when I'm certain that he won't lead this family down a dangerous path. But there are so many examples of Death Eaters that liked what You-Know-Who told them, but when they saw what You-Know-Who was willing to do they decided they didn't like it anymore. And when they tried to get out, he killed them."

"Harry hates You-Know-Who. He would *never* side with him. If Dumbledore has been right all these years, and You-Know-Who really isn't dead, Harry might be the best chance we've got," Percy said adamantly.

"Because of the terrible power," Mr. Weasley said. "But what if the terrible power is just that: terrible? What kind of price would the Wizarding world have to pay? It's dangerous to give out that kind of

trust freely, son. I've made a choice to distance myself just a little, just in case. I hope I'm proven wrong, I really do. But if I'm right..."

Harry could not bear to listen any longer, and turned back to the Burrow, and steeled himself for an evening of pretending to Ginny and Ron that everything was perfectly fine. The worst part of listening to the conversation that he was not meant to hear was that he understood... somehow, that made the pain worse. And for the very first time, Harry was eager to leave the Burrow.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHP

"Hermione!" Harry called out in relief. He and Ginny were sitting at Florean Fortescue's enjoying an ice cream. Ginny had been asking him some very pointed questions for the last ten minutes, so his happiness at seeing the bushy-haired witch was not simply because he had not seen her all summer. He intended to tell Ginny what had transpired between him and Mr. Weasley, and the conversation he had overheard. Just not in a place bustling with people.

"Hi, Harry! Hi, Ginny!" she said. "Mum and Dad just left; I'm staying at the Leaky Cauldron with you guys tonight."

Harry beamed. "That's great."

"Where's Ron?" Hermione asked, before she even sat down. Harry and Ginny exchanged sly smiles. "What?" she narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "What does that look mean?"

"Someone has a birthday coming up," Ginny said. "We all went in on your gift, and Ron's... managing it."

"Oh," Hermione said. She looked pleased. "My mum and dad gave me some money and I thought I'd – Harry! What's that?"

"It's just a broomstick," Harry said casually, though he was grinning widely.

"It's not just a broomstick," Ginny rolled her eyes. "It's a *Firebolt*, Hermione. It's the fastest broom in the world, and Harry's just promised that I get to try it first."

“I did, did I?” Harry asked. “You get to go before me?”

“Mmhmm,” Ginny smiled. “I heard you quite clearly.”

“I must’ve forgotten,” Harry said.

“Is that the broom all the boys were goggling at?” Hermione asked. “Mum, Dad, and I could hardly get through the crowd outside the Quidditch shop to get to Gringott’s.”

“The very one,” Harry said. “I thought I’d try out for the Quidditch team, so I needed my own broom.”

Hermione opened her mouth – probably to ask if Harry was sure he could afford to buy it – when Ron arrived, distracting them all. He carried what looked like a large bundle of ginger fur tucked under his one of his arms like a Quaffle, and a cat carrier and other supplies in the other. Crookshanks did not appear to be happy, from the way he was emitting a steady growl.

“Sorry it took so long – I needed to explain a few things to Crookshanks here,” Ron said, apparently not noticing Hermione.

“You should’ve let Hermione do that,” Ginny grinned. “It is her cat, after all.”

Hermione’s eyes went round with shock. “You got me a cat?” she squeaked.

Ron looked a little uncertain. “Well... we were going to get you an owl, but then we saw Crookshanks here, and we thought of you immediately. If you don’t like him –“

“Don’t be silly, Ron! He’s perfect!” Hermione opened her arms, and Crookshanks scrambled out of Ron’s arms and onto her lap. “What a good boy... you already know I’m yours, don’t you, you smart boy?”

Ron preened as though Hermione was talking about him. Harry saw Ginny’s small smile out of the corner of his eye. Then he felt her felt the light touch of her hand on his inner thigh, and suddenly all thoughts left his brain except the fact that he was exceptionally glad

that he'd decided to wear wizard's robes instead of less concealing jeans.

The rest of the day was so perfect and enjoyable that Harry almost forgot what had occurred at the Burrow. After deciding that they had shopped enough (even Hermione was eager to leave Flourish and Blotts once she caught a glimpse of the Monster Book of Monsters – the book seller had broken down in tears when he realized that they needed three of them), they returned to the Leaky Cauldron and Crookshanks. They played numerous games of Exploding Snap, and Harry was hard-pressed to decide who had more fun, the humans or the cat. The twins stopped by every ten minutes to ogle his Firebolt, and even Percy asked to have a go once they reached Hogwarts.

Ron, mercifully, did not press Harry for answers, even in the relative privacy of the room they shared. Harry sighed, glad that he had one more day to put off telling them.

Relief died a painful death when Ginny tiptoed into their room well after midnight. *Damn*, Harry thought glumly. *They lulled me into a false sense of security.*

"What gives, Harry?" Ginny demanded and, after turning on a lamp, plopped down on the bed, right on top of Harry's feet. He tried very hard to tear his mind away from the fact that Ginny was sitting on the bed he occupied.

"We know something happened, mate," Ron said.

"What gave me away?" Harry asked weakly.

They both rolled their eyes.

"First, you came back from the shed looking like death," Ron said.

"And you weren't in there for that long," Ginny said. "I watched you from the window. You spent about half a minute actually inside, bumped into Percy, and then stood as still as a statue for about ten minutes."

"Then you barely ate at dinner, even though you've always shown a mighty appreciation for Mum's cooking after you've spent time with the Muggles," Ron continued, "and you went up to bed at about eight o'clock."

"After which you pretended to be asleep so Ron couldn't interrogate you," Ginny added. "So... basically everything you did yesterday and today showed us that something is very wrong."

So Harry told them everything in excruciating detail.

"Oh, Harry," Ginny said softly.

"I guess we haven't been pretending as well as we thought we have, eh?" Ron asked.

"I've been thinking today," Harry said hesitantly. "I don't think it's awful, what your dad said. I understand a lot of it. I'm pretty sure that your family is going to trust me one day."

"I just wish it were today," they all said in unison.

Ginny stayed as long as she dared as they sat in silence but all too soon the comforting weight on his feet disappeared and Ginny returned to the room she was sharing with Hermione. Harry tried determinedly to sleep after she left, but the rest he got was less than satisfactory. He dozed between fitful dreams that he could not remember, and from which he woke up feeling anxious.

Tempers ran high the next day as everyone struggled to pack up their things and make it to the platform on time. They did not have the benefit of the Ministry cars – although Harry saw it as a good thing that he did not have a supposedly deranged mass-murderer after him. But that made him think of Sirius, so he found a spot and was squashed between Ron and an especially loud and excited George, who helped him take his mind off his errant godfather.

They made it to King's Cross with about fifteen minutes to get onto the platform without being seen by the Muggles, stow their luggage, and get on the train. Mr. Weasley illegally parked the car, cast a

charm that would make Muggle policemen think it belonged there, and urged his children, Harry, and Hermione to hurry.

"You two go first," Mrs. Weasley pointed at Ron and Harry. "I'm not risking the two of you not making it through the barrier again."

Ron and Harry grinned, looked around furtively, and casually leaned up against the barrier. Thirty seconds later, Ginny and Hermione joined them. "Come on," Ron said. "Let's get a compartment, and then go find Neville and Luna."

They waded through the sea of parents hugging their children goodbye and issuing last minute reminders, heading toward the back of the train. Harry and Ron lugged the trunks up, and, staggering under the weight, placed them in a luggage rack overflowing with haphazardly placed trunks. Hermione, carrying a spitting and hissing Crookshanks, brushed her hair out of her eyes, and went looking for an empty compartment.

She poked her head around the corner. "I've found one, finally, there's someone in it but there's still room for all of us."

"Let's say goodbye to Mum and Dad," Ginny suggested.

"Let me get Crookshanks settled," Hermione said.

They jumped off the train and found the older Weasleys with little time to spare. Ron and Ginny gave their parents fleeting hugs, and Harry and Hermione shook their hands. "Have a safe term, dears," Mrs. Weasley said.

The whistle was already blowing by the time they reached their compartment, and the train lurched forward before they found their seats. All four sighed with relief, and Harry was glad to finally be on his way back to Hogwarts. He grinned over at the other occupant of the compartment: Remus Lupin, former Marauder, was already asleep.

"What's funny, Harry?" Hermione asked.

“Oh,” Harry said. “Uh, he must be a professor, right? Malfoy and his mates won’t try anything around us with him around.”

“It’ll keep us from getting detention before we even get there,” Ron added. He peered at the small traveling case next to Remus’ feet. “R. J. Lupin... where have I heard that name before?”

Harry shrugged. “Sounds familiar to me too.” Remus twitched a little, and Harry wondered if he was feigning sleep. He said, in a louder voice, “I think it was at Pettigrew’s trial.”

“Yeah!” Ron said. “Dad mentioned that he wanted to hear what happened.”

“Do you reckon he knew Pettigrew or something?” Ginny asked. “If he did, he might know Sirius Black, Harry!”

Definite movement.

“Did you hear from Sirius Black over your holiday, Harry?” Hermione asked.

“No,” Harry was definitely speaking louder than normal; and Ron and Ginny struggled to hide their laughter. “I thought he was my godfather, and my dad’s best mate.”

“I’ve heard that Azkaban is really horrible,” Hermione said seriously.

“Yeah,” Ron said. “Dad reckons it’s the worst place he’s ever been to.”

Just then, their game was halted due to the arrival of a harassed-looking Neville and a serene Luna. “We’ve been looking all over for you,” Neville said. He looked around. He seemed perplexed when he noticed Remus. “I’ve never seen an adult on here before, except the cart lady and the driver. Reckon he’s the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor?”

“We were just thinking that,” Ron said. “Hi, by the way. How was your summer?”

“Wonderful,” Luna said happily. “Daddy and I traveled all around Eastern Europe, looking for the famed Poppleworm.”

Hermione opened her mouth, an annoyed gleam in her eyes, so Harry quickly asked, “did you find any?”

“No,” Luna said, just as happily. “But it was such fun looking.”

Harry cocked his head and stared at her, momentarily stunned. That was the key to Luna, wasn't it? She was completely willing to ignore the facts and believe anything she wanted to. She fully appreciated and reveled in the fact that life was more of a... journey, or a quest. It wasn't about being right or wrong, with her. He didn't think he could ever live like that, but he felt a bit wistful all the same. Especially when he knew—

“Harry,” Ron said loudly. His eyes brimmed with mischief. “I'm still wondering why Mr. Black,” he snorted, unable to help himself, “hasn't contacted you yet.”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe he and my dad weren't as good of mates as everyone said.”

“Perhaps you ought to give him some time, Harry,” Hermione said softly. “He might be having trouble getting used to the fact that everyone knows he's innocent. I mean, after Pettigrew attacked you three, I read up on everything. They didn't even give him a trial! Everyone just assumed that he was guilty, and no one spoke up for him.”

Remus Lupin made a sudden movement, as though pretending to be jerked awake. “Excuse me,” he murmured. He stood and grabbed his worn traveling case, stepped over Ron's legs, which were stretched out so that he could put his feet up on the seat across from him, and stepped out of the compartment.

“Oh,” Hermione looked terribly guilty. “I hope we didn't... I suppose we were talking a bit loud.”

But Harry did not believe that Remus had been annoyed with chatter. He suspected that it had to do with the subject matter, and he

remembered that Dumbledore had told him that Remus had refused to speak of Sirius at all. He watched Remus leave, and was disturbed by the amount of pain and guilt on his face.

He stared at the door for long moments, trying to figure out what the hell had just happened. Ginny patted his leg. Her hand lingered for just a moment longer than was strictly necessary for a friendly gesture, and his entire body erupted in gooseflesh. He felt it acutely when her small fingers – *she has small fingers because she's TWELVE YEARS OLD*, he told himself fiercely – caressed his thigh and withdrew.

Thankfully, a diversion in the form of Neville mentioning Lockhart served to distract him from what felt like intense physical pain that came in the form of desire.

“What was that, Neville?” Harry asked.

“I heard that Lockhart woke up,” Neville looked slightly fearful of Harry’s reaction. Ron had a dark look on his face, and played moodily with his wand. Harry took Neville’s expression to mean that he had not forgotten that Harry (and Ron) had almost killed their Defense Against the Dark Arts professor last term. “My Gran... she, uh, had business at St. Mungo’s yesterday, and I overheard one of the Healers talking about it with another witch.”

Harry could well guess what sort of business that Augusta Longbottom had at St. Mungo’s. He assumed that she and Neville had gone to visit his parents – who had been tortured into insanity, and now permanently resided in a ward for people who would never recover from spell damage – before the start of the new school term.

“That’s a good thing,” Hermione said firmly. “I’m sure that you’re quite relieved, Ron, that you haven’t caused permanent damage.”

“Yeah,” Ron said. Harry heard the half-truth, though apparently Hermione was convinced, because she smiled at Ron. Harry could not help but feel that perhaps it would have been for the best if Lockhart had remained at St. Mungo’s with no recollection of what had happened outside the Chamber of Secrets as he had last time.

Neville met Harry's eyes, and quickly looked away.

Chapter 13 – The Nature of Fear

“Are we the only Gryffindors in this class?” Ron looked around the Ancient Runes classroom, aghast. Harry took note of the lack of red and gold accessories – there were four Ravenclaws, two Hufflepuffs, and two Slytherins. So... last time Hermione had taken this class, she’d been all alone. Terry Boot, Padma Patil, and two other Ravenclaw third years (girls) that Harry did not recognize sat close together in a show of solidarity. Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones were directly in front of them. Blaise Zabini (Harry stifled a groan – Zabini was an annoying little git) and Daphne Greengrass, meanwhile, sat as far away from each other as possible.

“Looks like it,” Harry said. “Neville decided to take Divination.”

“An utterly useless class, if you ask me,” Hermione said scathingly. “I’m sure this class will be much more interesting.”

Hermione looked at Harry oddly when, instead of joining the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws to band together in an anti-Slytherin group, he sat across from Daphne. Harry still had some residual antipathy for most Slytherins (most would fight with Voldemort, and a lot of them sold out students from other houses to do so), but Daphne was all right.

“Hi,” Harry said. “You’re Daphne Greengrass, right?”

She nodded and raised an eyebrow at him. “That’s me. What’s your name again? Harold Porter... no, that’s not it... Harvey?”

Ron laughed, and Daphne shot him a startled look.

“I’m Hermione Granger,” Hermione said. “And the laughing git is Ron Weasley.”

“Do you really think I don’t know who you are?” Daphne asked, puzzled. “Harvey here is famous. And we’ve had classes together since first year.”

“Sorry for trying to be polite,” Hermione said waspishly. Harry grinned at Ron over her head. He should have known that Hermione and Daphne would clash even more than Hermione and Luna did. Not that he had known Daphne well at all – he only really had vague memories of her, but by the time they had left school to hunt Horcruxes, Harry had known enough about her that the biting sarcasm came as no surprise. How she and Dean Thomas had ever fallen in love, Harry had no idea. They had both died before Dean could tell him, and Astoria had refused to talk about it.

Daphne turned away from them with a roll of her eyes. A tall, broad man wearing long blue robes and a look reminiscent of Professor McGonagall entered the room, putting an end to any further discussion.”

“Ancient Runes,” he said, “is the study of a system of writing that is long dead, although it is rooted in the very first witches and wizards to live in Britain. My name, for those of you who do not know me, is Professor Octavius, and I am here to teach you the subtle intricacies of rune lore. Can anyone tell me why studying runes – even though many believe it to be a fanciful waste of time – is important?”

Hermione immediately raised her hand. “Ancient runes are more connected with the source of our power, sir.”

“Very good,” he said approvingly. “Anyone care to venture a guess as to why this is so?”

Hermione raised her hand again, but Padma Patil answered first. “Is it because it has... I don’t know... more pictures instead of symbols like the alphabet?”

“Indeed,” he said. “Runes, like the hieroglyphs of the ancient Egyptian wizards, can be used to strengthen your own magic. Not because it will increase your power, I’m afraid,” he said when he noticed that several students’ faces brightened. “It will, however, increase your focus. Students who have studied runes generally notice that their ability to master spells in other classes – especially Charms and Potions. This is because reading runes requires much more focus than simply reading. They can be very confusing, especially when we

begin to read sentences and even ancient texts written in runes instead of English. That won't be for a while, however..."

Harry pulled his quill and several sheets of parchment out of his bag. He and Ron had chosen to take Ancient Runes instead of Arithmancy because they most certainly did not want to take Divination, and Arithmancy sounded too much like maths. He had a feeling that Ancient Runes would not be as easy as they thought it would be.

"My head hurts," Ron moaned as they walked down to Hagrid's hut after lunch. He carried his copy of *Monster Book of Monsters* in a vise-like grip. It kept threatening to tear through the Spellotape that bound it.

"I thought it was brilliant," Hermione said ecstatically. "I can't *wait* until we actually start learning runes. Professor Octavius is *such* a good teacher, isn't he? You two ought to be glad you aren't taking Divination; Professor Trelawney is the complete opposite. She reminds me a bit of Luna, although Luna isn't nearly as aggravating."

Harry wondered if Hermione would ever tell them that she was using the Time-Turner to attend so many classes. He and Ron had loitered outside the classroom for several minutes so she could attend Arithmancy; neither had mentioned to Hermione that her disappearance had been noted.

"I liked it too," Harry said, surprised to find that it was true. "It's not going to be as easy as I thought it would be, but I like the increased focus thing."

Hermione turned her head this way and that, making sure that nobody was listening. "Speaking of increased focus... are we still meeting in the Room of Requirement this year?" she asked in a low voice.

"You're taking a lot of classes this year," Ron pointed out. "More than me and Harry and the others, anyway. Do you think you'll be able to find time for it?"

Hermione was silent for a long minute as they trotted down the steep hill. "I still think it's really important," she said.

“More important than homework?” Ron asked slyly.

“Just as,” Hermione admitted. “I’ll find time for it.”

“I got some interesting books in Egypt,” Ron said, “that have a lot of Charms stuff in it. I don’t understand half of it, but I reckon there are some books in the library that’ll explain it.”

“What kind of charms?” Hermione asked curiously. “I thought we were mainly focusing on Defense Against the Dark Arts – hexes and jinxes and stuff like that.”

“Charms have got a lot of power,” Ron said. “Curse Breakers use them, Bill says. And one of those Egyptian books talked about how a lot of wars were won because they knew some good protection charms.”

Hermione sighed blissfully. “I really love our study group.”

Ron and Harry grinned. “I reckon we should explore transfiguration, too,” Ron said.

“I don’t think we’ll need Herbology, though,” Harry said.

“Tell that to Neville,” Hermione said.

“Tell what to Neville?” Neville asked. They had come up upon him without even noticing.

“We’re branching out with our study group,” Harry said in a low voice. “Ron’s going to try to find some good charms we can use. And I thought I’d focus a bit more energy on transfiguration.”

His brows knit together. “There are loads of useful plants!” he said indignantly. “You wouldn’t believe the kinds of things you can do – I heard Uncle Algie talk about a plant that can even help you breathe underwater.”

“All right,” Ron said. “You’re in charge of the plant stuff.”

Neville grinned, but it slid from his face and was replaced with a look of pure horror. "What on earth are *those*?"

The small paddock outside Hagrid's hut was now home to several hippogriffs of different colors. Harry thought they looked quite beautiful in a dangerous sort of way. His eyes fell on Buckbeak, who was flapping his wings agitatedly as he watched, with sharp eyes, the approach of more and more students. His beak, which was as sharp as his talons, clacked open and shut rather menacingly.

"Hippogriffs?" Hermione said weakly. "Hagrid brought hippogriffs? To his first lesson?"

Indeed he had, and by the way his chest was out and his face appeared to be about to split from his grin, Harry knew that Hagrid was quite pleased with himself.

"Gather 'roun', everyone!" Hagrid boomed. Surrounded by third years, he seemed even taller than normal. "We're workin' with hippogriffs today, an' they can be tricky little blighters. Very proud, they are, an' you got to bow to 'em, an' treat 'em with respect, else they'll attack."

Several students stepped back, including Neville. Harry gripped his arm and dragged him back. "You were ready to fight a basilisk last year, Neville, and helped save the Philosopher's Stone our first year. What's a hippogriff compared to that?"

Neville swallowed, but remained where he was.

"Any volunteers?" Hagrid asked. Harry stepped forward immediately. "Good fer you, Harry. Now remember wha' I said about treatin' him with respect."

Harry stepped toward Buckbeak, and stopped before he came too close. Buckbeak regarded him imperiously, as though he were a king and Harry one of his subjects. Harry bowed low, maintaining eye contact. He thought of the last time he had seen the hippogriff; he had slashed the throat of one of the giants that had been fighting for Voldemort, and Harry felt real respect for the beast. It was still tense, however, when Buckbeak didn't bow for several moments.

Five minutes later, Harry was in the air, seated atop Buckbeak, and gazing down at the students below. He still preferred his broom – he planned to spend several hours with the Weasleys later this afternoon enjoying his new Firebolt – but there was something definitely wonderful about Buckbeak, and his strong, magnificent wings. Harry was reluctant to get off when Buckbeak made a jarring landing in front of Hagrid.

“Go on, Neville,” Harry said. Ron was already bowing to a dun colored hippogriff, and Hermione had followed him. “Buckbeak isn’t so bad, really.”

“He can’t be that scary,” Malfoy said snidely, “if Potter can do it. Longbottom might have to change his pants after this lesson, though.”

Draco Malfoy walked arrogantly toward Buckbeak, an ugly smirk on his face. “Filthy beast, probably as stupid as our new professor.”

Harry was very tempted to let Malfoy get slashed. But Hagrid’s job might be in jeopardy... Harry did not know if they would be able to arrange events so that Buckbeak would not be executed.

He sighed, and followed Malfoy, and broke into a run when Buckbeak reared up. His talons flashed in the sunlight—

“*You fool,*” Harry said viciously, and he yanked Malfoy out of the way, sending him sprawling on the grass, just as a deadly sharp talon came down and sliced Harry’s arm. Hermione screamed as Harry fell to the ground. Harry rolled over, gasping from the pain, used his right hand to try to staunch the alarmingly fast flow of blood.

Through a haze of pain, Harry said, “Hagrid... I think I need the hospital wing.”

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry winced as his injured arm – still a bit sore from when he had pulled Malfoy away from Buckbeak’s talons and had been slashed for his efforts – gave a painful throb. *If Hagrid’s job wouldn’t have been in jeopardy, I would’ve let the slimy git suffer,* he thought sourly.

Buckbeak had ripped Harry's arm open from shoulder to elbow, causing him to spend a few nights in the Hospital Wing with a disapproving, hovering Madam Pomfrey. To add insult to injury, Harry had missed Quidditch trials, and thus had to wait another *two years* before he could fly again.

His dark mood had pushed him into skipping the Hogsmeade trip (for which Ron was very grateful, as he would have Hermione all to himself since Neville had detention with Snape that afternoon), and he had left Ginny with Luna, promising to meet her in an hour or so in the Room of Requirement. Now he stood just outside the door to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, and was feeling unaccountably nervous about initiating a conversation with Remus Lupin.

"Harry?"

He turned and managed a weak smile. Remus had not been in his office after all, but had snuck up behind him, leaving Harry no alternative. "Hi, Professor," he said.

"I thought you'd be in Hogsmeade," Remus said.

"Er," Harry said. "My arm still hurts a little. I'll probably go next time."

Remus smiled, but his eyes were questioning; he had to be wondering why Harry had been standing outside his door. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Um," Harry said. Now that he was here, it suddenly did not seem like such a good idea. "I was wondering... I heard you had a lesson about a boggart? Ron and Hermione told me. I..."

"You want to know what shape your fear takes," Remus finished for him when Harry's voice trailed away. "That's very admirable, Harry, but... wouldn't it show you Lord Voldemort?"

Harry shook his head. "No," he said firmly. The boggart had shown him a dementor the first time around; he'd be damned if he was more frightened of Voldemort than he was of fear. But a sneaking suspicion

that the boggart would show him something different had prompted him to seek out Remus.

Remus raised his eyebrows in surprise, though he when he spoke, he did not mention it. "There is, in fact, another boggart. It was found in the dungeons this morning by Argus Filch, and I thought I would take care of it today, but I would be happy to allow you to do it instead."

"Thanks, Professor," Harry said quietly. "The charm... it's *Ridikulus*, isn't it?"

"Yes," Remus said. "But you have to try to make what you fear funny. Laughter is the best way to defeat a boggart – they can't abide the sound. To be perfectly honest, Harry, if you had been in class the day we covered the boggart, I probably would not have wanted you to face it. I think what you fear is probably stronger and more terrifying than the other students, who do not have such horrors in their pasts as you do. They were sufficiently shocked by your friend Ron's."

Ron had, in fact, told Harry this morning that he had had a nightmare just last night about what the boggart had shown him. It had been almost exactly what his mother had seen at Grimmauld Place. Dead Hermione, dead Ginny, dead family... a month later, and Ron's voice still shook when he mentioned it.

"I notice that you didn't fear *my* death," Harry had teased him when Ron had first confessed what had happened.

"Because I'm not afraid of you dying," Ron had shrugged. "Killing Curses don't seem to work on you."

"Ah," Severus Snape said, cutting into Harry's thoughts. He looked around and noticed, with a jolt of surprise, that they were already at the entrance to the stairs that led to the dungeons. Snape had stopped on the last stair, and he held a steaming mug of what Harry knew to be Wolfsbane Potion. "Professor Lupin, and Potter," he put a hostile emphasis on Harry's last name, "what brings the two of you down here? Shouldn't you be with your little friends in Hogsmeade?" he asked Harry.

“No,” Harry said shortly. “My arm hurts. You know, because I saved one of your own stupid students from being mauled by a hippogriff.”

“Mind your tone, Potter,” Snape said sleekly.

Remus put a hand on Harry’s shoulder, as though worried that things might escalate. “We’re about to find a boggart, Professor Snape,” he said courteously. “Harry wanted to face one.”

“I have the potion you requested of me,” Snape said. “But it will hold until after Potter shows us what the little Chosen Boy fears.”

Remus looked taken aback. “I don’t think —“

Snape interrupted him. “Unless you don’t want this potion...”

“Harry, we can wait until later,” Remus said, brows knit with worry. “It doesn’t have to be public.”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe it’ll show me Professor Snape in a dress, like Neville’s did,” Harry said. “I’ve regretted missing that since I heard about it. A long pink one, I think... with little roses on the collar.” He did not particularly like the way that Snape had practically blackmailed Remus, so he quite enjoyed the look of anger on Snape’s face.

“Very well,” Remus sighed after a moment; he had stepped in front of Harry as if to protect him from Snape’s wrath. But Snape’s mouth had merely twisted into a grimace, and he had not drawn his wand. Not that Harry had thought he would, but Remus had no idea that Snape had been an ally since Harry’s second day at Hogwarts.

They walked silently. Remus opened his mouth several times to speak, Harry noticed, but whatever the other man wished to say, he did not want to do so in front of Snape, who followed behind them like an overgrown bat. The trunk that held the boggart was in a small room that apparently was used for storage. It was halfway between the Potions classroom and the entrance to the Slytherin common room, and the air inside was stuffy and was rather warmer than was typical in the dungeons.

Harry immediately looked at the trunk that was partially obscured by a broken table laying on its side and a holey chintz lounge. It quivered a little. Harry stared at it with narrowed eyes. *What are you going to show me?* He asked it. *The ones I love lying dead on the floor? A dementor?* He wondered if he might see the Weasleys, with angry faces and hatred pointed directly at him. He hoped he didn't; that would be very selfish of him.

"Ready, Harry?" Remus asked easily. "Remember the charm?"

"Yeah," Harry said.

"*Alohamora*," Remus pointed his wand at the trunk, staying well behind Harry. It sprang open with a creaking groan and a squeal of rusted hinges.

The boggart could not recreate the scene of Harry's worst fear, for which he was extremely grateful. Looking at himself, splattered with blood and gore was bad enough without having to see everything else. The boggart had taken the form of Harry at his absolute worst moment, right before he had killed Voldemort. His own eyes glittered with rage and madness, and Harry realized why Arthur Weasley had been concerned about the look in Harry's eyes after Umbridge's insinuation. *I should have realized what my worst fear would be*, Harry thought critically. *Of course it would be that the future is going to fall out the way it did, that I would be the last one standing.*

"*Ridikulus*," Harry said firmly. He did not waste time trying to find something funny; he didn't think that he could. Instead of the boggart-Harry being put in witches' robes, or growing an extra arm, there was a small pop indicating that he had successfully enchanted it, and Harry saw himself lying spread-eagle on the floor, obviously dead. It felt like a promise.

Remus shoved him aside before the fist that had wrapped around Harry's stomach had eased up a bit, enough to allow him to laugh. Boggart-Harry disappeared, and a boggart moon hung low in the classroom, full and shiny yet ominous, because Harry knew what it represented. All three watched as the moon faded away, and the boggart was destroyed.

Remus whirled around, drawing a shaky breath, and gripped Harry's arm tightly. "Harry..." he said weakly. "That won't happen. You're a good person, I know you are, and you know it too. Don't let stupid suppositions make you believe otherwise."

His words felt like a benediction, and Harry swallowed, feeling a great lump in his throat that had not been there moments before. Remus had guessed wrong about the boggart. He obviously thought that Harry was afraid that he would become something twisted and evil, another Voldemort. But Harry saw that the other man was perfectly sincere; he was not afraid of what Harry would become, not like the Weasleys. He had faith, and it eased a little of the hurt Harry had felt since Arthur Weasley had rebuffed him.

"I know," Harry said finally. "It won't happen."

He felt the sudden urge to tell Remus everything. He glanced over at Snape, who had said nothing since they had met. He was staring back at Harry with the strangest expression, and Harry could not possibly tell what Snape was thinking. Harry took a deep breath, and opened his mouth—

"Professor?" Neville stood in the open doorway, white-faced and trembling. Though the other boy could just be nervous around Snape, Harry was certain that Neville had seen the boggart. This was confirmed when Neville's round eyes met Harry's.

"Hi, Neville," Harry said. "We were just... I wanted to fight a boggart, since I missed that class."

Neville tried to smile. *Please don't be afraid of me, Neville, please?*

"Mine wasn't as good as yours was," Harry said. "Isn't that right, Professor Snape?" Neville squeaked. *Try to set him at ease, Snape.*

Snape sighed, but Harry thought he was the only one who heard it. "I must admit that Potter has a point. However, just because it is flattering to be the worst nightmare of a thirteen year old boy, you still have detention. You will be disemboweling toads, Longbottom, and I am glad to see you did not bring gloves. You won't need them."

“Good luck, Neville,” Harry said sincerely. “It’s not that bad, though, once you get past the slime. And the smell.”

“See you at dinner, Harry,” Neville said glumly.

“Remember to take your potion, Lupin,” Snape said as he swept past them. “I wouldn’t like to see the consequences if you do not.”

After doing his (admittedly small) part in setting Neville at ease, Snape apparently had to reassert his nastiness by trying to torment Remus. Harry turned away to hide a smile, glad that some things never changed completely.

The momentary urge to confess everything to Remus had passed. It was a big decision, and Ron and Ginny had every right to be a part of it. Not that Harry thought that they would disagree, but the three of them were in this together. With that in mind, Harry sighed.

“Listen,” Remus said. He held the smoking goblet in both hands as they turned to leave the dungeons. “I have to admit that what you saw concerns me – I did not wish to say this in front of Professor Snape, but”—Harry felt a sinking in his stomach; did Remus decide not to trust him after all?—“what frightens you most disturbs me. Harry, your father was one of my best friends at Hogwarts, and to think that you’re burdened with something most thirteen year olds should never be burdened with... if you should ever feel the need to – to talk, Harry, my office door is always open.”

Something squeezed Harry’s heart so tightly that it was hard for him to breathe. Remus had only known Harry for one month, and yet he was already willing to trust him. He was not afraid of getting too close to Harry, did not think that Harry was tainted... He pushed that thought out of his mind.

“Thank you,” Harry said finally. The walk from the dungeons to the Entrance Hall had never seemed shorter.

“Ah,” Remus said. He grimaced at the potion and then smiled at Harry. “I’ve got to get back to work, Harry. Just remember what I said.”

"I will," Harry promised. Then, when Remus turned to leave, "Professor Lupin? I'll definitely be coming to your office. Just not yet."

"Any time."

Harry went the opposite direction, heading straight for the Room of Requirement. He did not pay very much attention to his surroundings, but was replaying what had just happened in the dungeons. This was the first time that he had encountered a boggart – not counting the time he had seen Mrs. Weasley's worst fears at Grimmauld Place – since his fourth year, during the final task in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. He wondered when his own worst fear had shifted, and suspected that it had after Sirius had died, when that loss had struck him like a physical blow. It had definitely happened by the time he fell in love with Ginny during his sixth year.

While fearing fear itself was perhaps wise, as Remus had said during one of their first discussions, Harry could not stop himself from breaking out into a cold sweat when he thought of fate repeating itself. *Not that it will*, Harry told himself sternly. *You know what to do now.*

His thoughts carried him to the door of the Room of Requirement. It was cracked open, and a pair of bright brown eyes peeked out at him. He smiled.

"Hey, bright eyes," he said, stepping into the room. He looked around, expecting to see Luna, but realized, with a sinking sensation, that she was not there. He and Ginny were quite alone. He eyed her warily, and she responded with a slow, sly smile. He backed away from her, and her smile widened.

"Hi, Harry," she said.

"Er," Harry said, watching her walk over to a chair. It was big enough for two... barely. It sat in front of a roaring fire, and on top of a large rug that looked quite soft and even more comfortable than the chair. "Where's"—his voice cracked and he cleared his throat—"Where's Luna?"

"She decided that she needed to write the essay we have due for potions," she replied. She was curled up on the chair like a cat. "We only have two more weeks to write it."

Harry swallowed and, searching for a distraction, decided to warm his hands by the fire. He watched her out of the corner of his eye (he couldn't help himself), and she stared at him almost without blinking. She adjusted herself so that her long hair draped over the arm of the chair. Sweat beaded on his brow.

"You're torturing me," Harry said hoarsely.

She didn't even bother to deny it. "I'm enjoying myself immensely."

Harry was too. "That note you left under my pillow... Seamus asked why I had to go wash again when I just had."

She laughed. It was such an open and delighted sound that it made Harry want to kiss that laughing mouth. "You started it," Ginny pointed out. "Or did I just imagine what your Patronus said while I was having my bath the other night?"

"That was after you did that thing you do," Harry said. "You know. Your blazing look."

"The one I get when I'm thinking about how much I love you?" she asked. "I can't help that. *You*, however, knew exactly what you were doing when you sent the message. I almost drowned."

"Me too," Harry said dryly. Without his volition, his feet brought him closer and closer to her, and he sat down with a sigh. She automatically curled up under his arm, and placed her hand over Harry's heart. He played with strands of her hair, and it slipped through his fingers like silk. How many times had they sat like this? Too many to count. Usually, it led to other things. But sometimes it hadn't and on those occasions Harry had—

He grinned when he noticed that a silver hairbrush had materialized out of nowhere. "Sit up, bright eyes, come on." She started to protest, until she saw that he held the brush in one hand. She got up, and sat

down again on the rug and leaned against Harry's legs. She sighed with utter contentment as he gently pulled the brush through her hair.

"You can keep doing that forever," she murmured.

Harry finally stopped, and she leaned her head up against his leg. He reached over and laid his palm over one of the spots where he most liked to kiss Ginny, where her shoulder met her long, pretty neck.

"Ginny..." he said softly. He didn't want to ruin this moment, but as more time passed, he grew increasingly aware that there was a certain subject that they avoided, all three of them. He probably wanted to talk about it least of all, but it seemed irresponsible.

"No, Harry," she said. "Not yet. Just... not yet."

"We have to think about it soon," Harry pointed out.

"Hopefully not for a while," she said. "If at all."

"All right," Harry conceded. He was only too willing to put off the discussion about her parents, a discussion that they had never dreamed, during the years of planning and painstakingly creating the potion that had required so much else of them. He remembered the vow he'd made in the kitchen at the Burrow, and renewed it to himself. "Tell me about the sword again?"

She stiffened. Ginny's anger toward Lockhart had not abated one whit, and she fully understood how violated Harry still felt about being Obliviated. Despite the fact that Harry had viewed those memories again and again in Dumbledore's Pensieve, she never tired of telling it.

Dumbledore had tried to reconstruct his memories, and whatever he had done had only worked a little. Harry no longer felt disoriented when they spoke of it, and sometimes he thought that a little wisp of memory had returned. But whenever he reached for it, it slipped away. The horrible holes in his mind were gone, but they were filled with mist and shadowy shapes, and not clarity. Lockhart, all evidence to the contrary, actually did have one good talent; unfortunately, thinking about it made Harry want to kill him. Dumbledore had told him,

regretfully, that if he forced it anymore, he was in danger of doing permanent damage. Harry, remembering what Voldemort had said about Bertha Jorkins being useless because he had broken through the memory charm that Mr. Crouch had placed on her, had reluctantly let it go.

“You didn’t know that the sword was impregnated with basilisk venom until –“

But the appearance of Ron’s Patronus interrupted her. It didn’t say anything – Harry assumed that Ron did not want to risk them being in a public place – but it moved agitatedly. Harry watched it, fully alert, brain working very quickly. If Hogsmeade was being attacked and he genuinely needed help, Ron would not have hesitated to make it speak.

“What the hell?” Ginny said blankly.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry and Ginny returned to the Gryffindor common room immediately, and waited for long anxious minutes for Ron. Neville tried to distract them by telling them how horrible his detention had been, and how he might vomit if he ever had to see the insides of a frog again.

Ron finally entered through the portrait hole, Hermione following him. They both were white-faced with fury, and Ron held what looked like a magazine in a death grip.

“Lockhart,” he growled, and he threw the copy of the latest edition of *Witch Weekly* on Harry’s lap. He sat down on an empty chair with a snarl.

Harry was not sure that he wanted to read it. Ginny grabbed it.

Ginny hissed when she saw the headline, and began to read aloud.

LOCKHART TELLS THE TRUTH ABOUT THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

By Raven Hubble

Witch Weekly is delighted to present to all loyal readers a new interview with our favorite wizard. He has just recovered from a horrible injury, which caused him to require several months of care at St. Mungo's, but he graciously agreed to the interview, especially as he has learned that he has won the annual 'Best Smile' award.

RH: Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me today, Mr. Lockhart. Everyone at Witch Weekly – and all our readers – is thrilled that you've had a complete recovery.

GL: I always enjoy getting in touch with my fans, Raven. And please, call me Gilderoy. We've corresponded so often over the years that it seems silly for you to be so formal.

RH: I see that your injuries haven't dimmed that smile one bit!

"I'll think of that next time," Ron said darkly.

GL: Thank you, my dear Raven. To be perfectly honest, my Order of Merlin, Third Class, seems paltry compared to the honor of being so beloved by my fans at Witch Weekly.

RH: You flatter us, Gilderoy! We merely appreciate your bravery... and your good looks. Now, before I say this, you have the staunchest support of the rest of the writers at our humble publication. But there have been the most distressing rumors going around.

GL: Ah, yes. One of the Healers at St. Mungo's – a truly delightful witch – told me about them.

RH: So you know that Harry Potter is claiming that you Obliviated him?

"Claiming?" Harry said loudly. "He did! And I still haven't got all my memories back."

"We know, Harry," Neville said. "I can't believe he's denying it."

GL: I heard, yes. Utterly preposterous. I have never had the need to use a memory charm.

Ron snorted. "I'll bet that he's lied about half the stuff he's done, and used a memory charm to cover his tracks."

"I wouldn't be at all surprised," Hermione said.

RH: We thought so. So what did really happen in the Chamber of Secrets last year?

GL: I don't remember very much of it – only bits and pieces –

RH: Do you think that you were the one to be Obliviated, then?

GL: I have no idea. The Healers... they've alluded to certain things. But they claim not to be able to tell, because the damage done to my brain was so vast. It may only be that the injuries I received caused this to happen.

"He's only saying that because he can't make a direct accusation without proof," Hermione said shrewdly. "If he did, Harry, you could be put on trial. He doesn't want that, since the truth would have to come out."

Harry nodded grimly.

RH: That's awful, Gilderoy! If it distresses you, we can talk about other things...

GL: No, no. My duty to my fans supercedes any discomfort I might feel. But I can only offer hazy memories.

RH: Not to worry.

GL: It began when young Ginevra Weasley was taken down into the Chamber of Secrets. I had been working on the mystery all year, you know, because as soon as Argus Filch's cat was petrified, I knew exactly what that meant. I didn't alert the other teachers because I did not want them placed in unnecessary danger.

RH: I'm sure they're very appreciative, Gilderoy.

GL: So when Ginevra Weasley disappeared, I knew that I had to save her.

"Had to run away, you mean," Ginny said viciously. "Bastard."

RH: How did you run into Harry Potter, then?

GL: I met them – Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Neville Longbottom – just before I was about to enter. They demanded to come with me. They threatened to hex me if I did not allow it.

RH: I'm surprised you didn't force them to stay behind. They ought to have known that only a powerful wizard like you could have been safe.

GL: I'm afraid that they were quite overwrought about young Ginevra's predicament. I allowed them to come, knowing that I could easily handle the basilisk. I regret that now – I had no idea that they would turn on me once we entered the Chamber.

RH: It was Ronald Weasley that caused your injuries, was it not?

"He's lucky Ron didn't kill him," Neville said, not looking at either Ron or Harry.

"Yeah, he is," Ron agreed.

GL: It was. I'm afraid that the young man became quite hysterical when we came upon the gigantic skin from the basilisk. I believe that he did not have any idea what he was doing.

RH: You have a soft heart, Gilderoy. I wouldn't be half so understanding, and I'm sure our readers won't either!

GL: I've always known that I am unusually brave. It seems arrogant to assume that others will be the same. I do not blame Ron Weasley, really. He was terrified.

RH: Will you be pressing charges?

GL: No, no, no. Of course not. He's just a little boy!

For a moment, Harry thought that a small tiger had entered the room with them. Ron was snarling. Crookshanks, who had settled on Hermione's lap just after Ginny started reading, watched Ron with an approving look.

"Ron," Hermione said. "We talked about this on the way back from Hogsmeade, remember? You can't do anything about this, and anger won't help."

"It's making me feel better," Ron grumped. But when Hermione reached over and clasped his hand, the expression on his face immediately softened. Despite Harry's rather large desire to throttle Gilderoy Lockhart, he smiled.

RH: He's a little boy that attacked you. Don't you want some sort of justice?

GL: No. I've managed to set it aside, and I hope you and everyone reading this will be able to as well. There was no lasting harm done; soon enough I'll be saving people from dangerous creatures once more.

RH: Oh, Gilderoy... you're such an inspiration. Do you remember anything more?

GL: No. I immediately asked after the children upon waking up, though, and was immensely relieved that Ron Weasley's hysterics did not end in tragedy.

RH: It disturbs me that Harry Potter falsely accused you of Obliviating him.

GL: As to that, I have no idea. I do not have any hard feelings for the boy. I often gave him advice in dealing with fame, as he does not have a father to turn to. But... I will say that I've noticed certain tendencies for him to seek even more fame. He has quite a following of awestruck students, you know. He allows them to photograph him.

"Only when I can't avoid it!" Harry said loudly. "Stupid – lying – arse."

RH: Gilderoy, I know it makes you uncomfortable to speak ill of anyone. But what if you were actually the one to save Ginevra Weasley from the basilisk? Do you think there's any possibility that he Obliviated you in order to take credit for it?

GL: Ah. I am not certain, nor do I wish to be. It is enough for me that Miss Weasley is safe. But I will say this: it would be highly unusual, almost impossible, for such a young man to kill a basilisk and survive to tell the tale. But I will say no more of this.

"You can stop reading," Hermione said, although Harry noticed that the interview continued. "They went on to talk about what hair products he uses. And put your wand away, Harry, Lockhart isn't here."

"No one at school is going to believe this," Neville said bracingly, once Ginny had ripped up the magazine and thrown the pieces into the fire. "Lockhart is an idiot. He couldn't even handle Cornish Pixies."

"Seen the interview, then?" George asked. Fred was right behind him, and they had large bags full of Zonko's products and satisfied looks. "We heard about it in the pub. Everyone's laughing about the idiot."

"They don't believe it?" Harry asked.

Fred smiled slyly. "We might have had to set a few people straight. Mostly the older girls, though, who were blinded by his teeth."

Ginny laughed. "I can't believe what he's saying."

"You'll have a bit of trouble with the older witches," George advised Ron. "They love Lockhart, Merlin knows why. But the other students remember how much of a stupid git he was."

The next several hours were spent roundly abusing their former Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. Harry could not even bring himself to worry about it, although Ron had already claimed that he was going to check his mail very carefully to ensure that some love struck, middle-aged witch wouldn't try to curse him.

Ron was absolutely delighted to find himself the center of attention during dinner. He was asked repeatedly to describe Stunning Lockhart, and when he told them that he had snapped the professor's wand, everyone within earshot applauded. McGonagall, who was passing by at that point, had to cover her mouth to hide her smile.

Harry got out of the shower later that night – he could still hear people roaring with laughter down in the common room, and he was certain that they were still discussing Lockhart – and found Neville sitting on his bed. He was obviously waiting for Harry.

"What's up, Neville?" Harry asked.

"Er," Neville said, and then muttered something under his breath that Harry could not hear. The other boy looked desperately uncomfortable.

"What?" Harry asked, as he pulled on his pajamas. He stared at Neville until he looked up.

Neville took a deep breath. "I think... no, I know that you have a secret."

"Neville..."

"Don't deny it," Neville said firmly. "Don't worry... I'm not – I trust you. I don't think you're a madman. But I know you and Ron are hiding something, and I think Ginny is too."

Damn. Harry had absolutely no idea what to say. He flattened his hair. "Listen, Neville... you're right."

"But you aren't going to tell me," Neville said glumly. "You don't – you don't trust me?"

"I trust you," Harry told him. "I *do*. Please believe that."

"Then *why*?"

Harry thought back to his very first year – the real one, when he had known very little about anything. He'd just faced Voldemort for the

first time, and he had asked Dumbledore for the truth. What was it that he had said? “Neville... someone once told me that sometimes we aren’t ready for the truth. It can be a... burden.”

“Is it about the prophecy?”

“In a way,” Harry said honestly.

“Are you... are you preparing us for something?” Neville licked his lips. “Is that why we’re practicing so much?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “Listen, Neville... if you don’t want to, I’d understand. You don’t have to, you know, keep coming with us to the Room of Requirement.”

Neville turned away, and Harry began to fear that he would say that he could not live with Harry keeping secrets from him. He’d have to talk to Ron and Ginny, but maybe it wouldn’t hurt if Neville – and Hermione, because they couldn’t tell Neville and not tell her – knew a little sooner. But Harry did not want to place that burden on the other boy’s shoulders just yet. Nor did he want Neville to stop learning the skills that would help him survive.

“My parents,” Neville said softly. Harry started. “They were tortured by You-Know-Who’s followers right after you made him disappear.”

Harry sat on the edge of his bed.

“I’m pretty sure... no, I know that we’re learning all this stuff because of You-Know-Who,” Neville continued. “So even if you can’t tell me, I’m going to keep learning, because... well, because of my parents. I want to fight too if he comes back.”

“When,” Harry said quietly. “When he comes back.”

Neville nodded. “I thought he might. My Gran told me that Dumbledore told her that it was only a matter of time.”

The silence lasted for so long that Harry assumed that Neville was done talking. Suddenly exhausted, he climbed under his covers, and set his glasses on the top of his closed trunk. He yawned, wondering

if he would be plagued by nightmares due to the encounter with the boggart, and raised his wand to close the bed hangings.

“Harry?”

Harry squinted at the Neville-shaped blur. “Yeah?”

“Are you ever going to tell me?”

“Yep,” Harry said. “Count on it.”

Chapter 14 – And It All Falls Apart

Harry looked up at the Burrow with something that felt suspiciously like dread. He had not wanted to join the Weasleys for Christmas almost as much as he did want to come. He'd come very close to signing up to stay at Hogwarts. Perhaps he could have assisted Dumbledore with the ongoing (and apparently futile) search for Sirius. But he had thought of spending Christmas away from Ginny for the first time since he was seventeen years old, and how miserable that would be, and decided to accept the invitation.

"Give me a hand over here, mate," Ron said. "You know I can't carry a trunk like this."

There had been a flurry of cursed mail that had winged its way toward Ron in the months after Gilderoy Lockhart's interview. He'd managed to dodge most of them – had, in fact, taken to burning any mail sent from unknown senders to the raucous applause of spectators – but he'd been caught unawares this morning, and his hands were covered with blisters.

They smelled quite awful, too.

"Sorry," Harry grabbed the handle of Ron's trunk, and pulled it toward the house. The combined weight of his and Ron's trunks forced him to pause every five feet to catch his breath. He and Ron were pretty much alone; the twins had not even brought their trunks home with them, but had stuffed two large bags they'd filched from Mr. Filch full of clothes and gifts; Mr. Weasley had carried Ginny's trunk in for her. Harry rubbed his back and was grateful that he hadn't brought Hedwig with him; that cage would just be one more thing to carry.

"Let me help," Percy said. He stepped off the back porch, neatly avoiding the Wellington boots. "Hands okay, Ron?"

"Yeah," Ron muttered. "Stupid witch."

"You should've gone to Madam Pomfrey," Percy said pompously. "She could have fixed them up for you."

“Didn’t want to miss the train,” Ron said. “I’m sure Mum has something that’ll work for this.”

“Mum’s a bit annoyed with Dad,” Percy warned. “I wouldn’t risk asking her for anything right now. I told him that he ought not to have flown the car...”

It was late afternoon. Mr. Weasley had enduring much pleading and cajoling from his children to fly the car home; he had eventually given in, and they were home much earlier than they would have done. Mrs. Weasley had obviously been able to put two and two together.

Indeed, Harry could hear her yelling as soon as he stepped closer to the door.

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU FLEW THAT CAR! HONESTLY, WHAT WERE YOU THINKING? YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO SET AN EXAMPLE FOR THE CHILDREN!”

“Molly, dear,” Mr. Weasley said soothingly. “It was perfectly all right. No one saw us, the Invisibility Booster worked just fine.”

“THAT IS NOT THE POINT!”

Harry followed Ron into the house, but when Ron stopped to ask his mother to cure his hands, Harry decided that it was a good time to leave Ron behind. Once Mrs. Weasley’s temper was riled...

Ron stumped in the attic room not ten minutes later. His hands looked just as painful as before. “Mum was quite nasty about it. Said that I ought not to have opened a letter from a stranger.”

“She’s not going to fix them?” Harry asked in disbelief.

“She is,” Ron said. “She said she’d be up in a few minutes. I reckon she wants to finish yelling at Dad first. I wished she’d done it before I had to go to the loo, though.”

Harry grimaced. He couldn’t even imagine how awful that experience must have been. “She’s right, you know. You knew that you shouldn’t have opened it.”

“Thanks,” Ron said, his voice laced with sarcasm. “I hadn’t figured that out yet.”

“Any time.”

The ghoul that lived above Ron’s room apparently did not like the sound of their voices, for they heard loud banging. Ron had to speak loudly over the noise.

“Listen, Harry,” he said. “I reckon we should kill Lockhart.”

“Ron!” Harry hissed, sitting up. “Not here!”

“No one’s listening,” he said. “You worry too much. I think Lockhart’s going to screw everything up.”

“I know you don’t like the fact that you’ve been getting hate mail—”

Ron shook his head. “It’s not about that. He’s very popular, you know. And once things start to really happen, I reckon he’ll make trouble for us.”

“You really think we should kill him?” Harry asked.

“Or at least put him in the permanent spell damage ward,” Ron said. “He’s a threat to our plans, Harry. I know it. He almost effed everything up last year, almost ruined everything we’re trying to do, and I don’t like the idea of letting him try again.”

Harry remembered a time when neither one of them would consider this. He eyed Ron very carefully. Ron was sincere, that was certain. But it was also clear that he did not like the idea, for which Harry was very grateful.

He stood up after several minutes of silence. “I’m going to go talk to Ginny,” he said. “I’ll tell her to meet us up here tonight after everyone’s asleep. And then we’ll ask Dumbledore if he can think of a way to do this without... you know.”

Ron looked relieved.

Harry noted the open door ruefully. They were going to have to be a lot less complacent. Just because their plan had, thus far, worked, they still had quite a lot of road to travel, and it was dangerous to discuss it casually.

He walked swiftly down the stairs. He heard Mrs. Weasley yell “ARTHUR!” at the top of her lungs, followed by a resounding thud; she was still at it, then. Mr. Weasley ought to ask the twins about how to head off her anger. He grinned. He knocked on Ginny’s door, and pushed it open—

And he caught her in a state of undress that made his mouth go instantly dry. *Cover your eyes, cover your eyes, cover your eyes*, he told himself. But his traitorous hands did not obey him. She was wearing everything but a shirt, and he could not take his eyes off her simple white bra.

“Harry,” Ginny said pleasantly. “Shut the door.”

He obeyed immediately.

“You’re getting your Christmas present a little early,” she said ruefully.

“Your mum and dad...”

“Mum’s too busy fighting,” she waved her arm, and Harry gulped.

“You need... to put on your shirt,” he said hoarsely. He found himself suddenly sitting on her bed.

“Why would I do that?” she asked. “I’ve been trying to think of how I’d orchestrate this, and here... you... are...”

“Ginny... we can’t do this...” he said. And then she let her bra slip to the ground, and all thought suddenly flew out of Harry’s head. He grabbed her pants and pulled her closer so that she stood between his legs. He stroked her arms, and then her back, and then he brought one hand around to her front and she gasped.

She leaned forward and pressed a kiss on his mouth, and whispered in his ear, “You don’t get to have *all* the fun.” And for one thrilling

second, Ginny's hand was on him, and it was the best feeling in the world—

BANG!

The door crashed against the opposite wall, and Mrs. Weasley stood there, Mr. Weasley right behind her, and for a horrible moment there was only silence. Ginny screamed and dove for a shirt.

“GET AWAY FROM MY DAUGHTER!”

“Mum, no!” Ginny yelled. “It isn't—“

But Mrs. Weasley drew her wand and silenced her daughter. Trembling with rage, she opened her mouth and closed it again, and Harry could see that Mrs. Weasley completely despised him.

It was Mr. Weasley that spoke the words that caused a pain so sharp that Harry could hardly breathe. “You need to leave. Get out of the Burrow.”

HPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry did not know when he had decided not to go back to Hogwarts, but it must have been sometime during the long walk down the stairs, past the dumbfounded twins and Percy, and down the snowy drive. He only knew that when the Knight Bus appeared and Stan Shunpike asked his destination, he opened his mouth and said “Godric's Hollow” instead of “Hogsmeade.” How could he possibly face Dumbledore now? and Snape?

His stomach felt hollow, and there was a rushing sound in his ears, and he could still hear Ginny screaming at her parents that it was her fault; she'd made him touch her. The shouting had followed him from the Burrow which had been his most favorite place in the entire world besides Hogwarts, and from which he had just been exiled.

Stan was speaking to him, but Harry could not summon the effort to reply.

"Which house in Godric's Hollow?" Stan said loudly. By the peeved expression on his face, Harry realized that Stan had asked this several times.

"I dunno," Harry said, and it seemed wrong that he had no idea which street his parents had lived on. "The one with the gaping hole in it," Harry gritted his teeth. "You know, where Voldemort murdered my entire family. Think you can find that?"

Stan did not say anything else, but left Harry alone with the guilt that had started to fester.

"Here we are," he said, when the Knight Bus jerked to a halt and Harry was thrown off his seat.

"Thanks," he muttered, and dragged his trunk out with him. Stan and Ern wasted no time in leaving and within seconds, Harry was alone on the street. He dropped the end of the trunk he carried and stared at the cottage. It filled his vision completely, and he could not help but remember seeing the memories of that night through Voldemort's point of view. Voldemort had stood right here, and had watched Harry's father entertaining his son with puffs of smoke. Harry's mother had come in, had taken Harry to his nursery to put him to bed.

It took several moments for Harry to realize that the clicking noise came from grinding his jaws tightly together. A hatred for Voldemort that was as vast and as deep as the sea rose up inside him. *His fault. Everything.* The emotion sustained him, and propelled him past the sign that sprung up and into the cold, empty cottage.

I don't care how cold it is, Harry told himself fiercely. He considered lighting a fire in the hearth, but the last thing he wanted to do was get hauled up in front of the Ministry of Magic for underage magic. Harry scowled at his wand and threw it aside; it rolled under one of the musty, moldy couches that nobody had bothered to clear out.

As Harry did not imagine that he could feel any worse, he set out to explore, feeling a sense of increasing disbelief that not only had the Wizarding world made a monument out of a house where his mother and father had *died*, but they had left everything exactly the way it

had been. The pram was still by the stairs, there were dishes in the sink, and cans of food in the damned pantry.

“I’m surprised they didn’t leave your bodies here for me to discover,” Harry said. His voice was unnaturally loud. “I wish I had the Resurrection Stone so I could show you this travesty. The monument to the bloody Boy-Who-Lived! But, oh, I forgot. *That* particular Deathly Hallow doesn’t work anymore. Which means that I get to die.”

He kicked the pram and sent it crashing into the wall. He stomped up the stairs. As soon as he reached the top, a draft of icy air hit him and rage crashed over him all over again. *How could they leave it like this?* The door to the nursery, where Voldemort had murdered his mother and had been blasted into half-death, was open. Snow was falling onto piles of broken, rotting furniture.

Harry did not know how long he stood there. Long enough that his hair and shoulders were covered in the flakes of snow that was falling steadily, and long enough for Harry’s rage to leave him exhausted. He felt dangerously on the verge of tears, and he missed the anger that served as a buffer to the guilt and grief.

He crossed the hall and found his parents’ bedroom. It was relatively intact, but it smelled musty and old, and he knew that he would not sleep here, could not bear the thought of sleeping in this room. He dragged the old comforter off the bed – he grudgingly admitted that he could use the warmth – and brought it downstairs to the small sitting room where he had placed his trunk.

He threw himself down on the couch and pulled the comforter over his head.

He was staring at the darkness, thoughts awhirl, when he noticed that the dark had lightened by a degree. It was not until he heard Ginny’s voice that he sat up straight and threw the cover off.

Her Patronus, a silver doe that was the mate to his stag, stood before him. “*Harry, I’m s-s-so sorry, Mum’s screaming at Ron, don’t reply, I love you.*” The heartbreak he heard in her voice suddenly drained him of all energy, and he fell back onto the couch, sending up another cloud of dust, as it disappeared.

Don't feel guilty, Ginny, it was my fault as much as yours, he willed her to hear him, somehow. And, pressing the heels of his hands hard against his eyes to somehow hold the tears in, he fell into a deep and (for once) dreamless sleep.

Over the next few days, Harry developed a steady routine of wallowing in misery, shaking with rage, and scavenging through his parents' pantry for things that he could eat. He had not even picked up his wand from where he had dropped it. Not even just that morning when Dumbledore's phoenix Patronus had found him.

"Heard that you left the Burrow. No details. Where are you?" It had said before fading away like Ginny's.

But the last person that Harry wanted to talk to was Dumbledore; if he talked to Dumbledore, he'd have to talk to Snape, and he could not bear the thought of how humiliating it would be to tell them that he had broken off all ties with the elder Weasleys because he had touched their daughter. A small voice in the back of his head that sounded like Hermione told him that he was being completely irresponsible and irrational. Harry got rather good at ignoring it.

Finally, he had to leave the house. He grabbed his invisibility cloak and a small bag of wizard money – money was money, and most shop owners would be pleased to be paid with real gold. At least that's how he justified it. *Hermione did it*, Harry told himself.

The sky was leaden with clouds, and Harry was certain that it would snow again this evening. He tried to remember whether it was New Year's Eve or New Year's Day, but he couldn't be sure. He was fairly certain that he had slept through Christmas... he remembered waking up to the sound of drunken carolers, but the happy revelry made him think of the Burrow, and how much he wanted to be there, so he'd gone back to sleep again. He walked down the quiet street, and was glad that no one was out and about. He hadn't washed in what? Four days? Five? He couldn't remember.

He hoped that Dumbledore would not send him another message. They'd been coming in increasing frequency, and he did not want to deal with Muggles being frightened by a talking, misty phoenix.

He found a small corner store, and randomly grabbed Muggle snacks and stuffed them in his robes. He left a few galleons on the shelves. He wandered over to the refrigerators, thinking that he ought to get a few bottles of water. He'd found the well in his parents' backyard, but Harry thought it might not be as clean as he would have hoped. He scanned the beverages, and he was about to grab for some water when something caught his eye. *Why not? I haven't got anything better to do.*

Ten seconds later, he walked out of the store clutching a bottle of whiskey (it wasn't exactly firewhiskey, but Harry knew it would get the job done) in one hand, bags of chips in the other, and had four big packets of beef jerky stuffed down his pants. *Life*, he thought resentfully, *does not get much better than this.*

It had taken him and Hermione ages to find his parents' graves last time, and even though that had been over a decade ago, Harry's feet took him unerringly to the spot. He brushed the snow off the tombstones, and wished that he had thought to liberate flowers from the corner store as well.

He let his snacks fall to the ground. "Hey, Mum. Hey, Dad," he said. He opened the bottle of whiskey, and took a deep pull from it. It burned down his throat and hit his belly like a Stunner. He gasped.

"I wish you could tell me why I screw everything up," Harry said. He felt the back of his eyes sting with tears, and knew that they weren't there because of the whiskey. He took another drink then, because he didn't want his parents to think that he didn't know how to share, he poured a little over their grave. "I try, I try, and I try and it's – never – fucking – good – enough." He forced his jaw to unclench. "Sorry about that, Mum. You probably don't like to hear me swear."

Harry thought about the Resurrection Stone again. "I wish I could really talk to you. Dad, you could probably tell me everything I'm doing wrong... and you'd probably help me fix it."

Harry turned around quickly; he thought he had just heard movement among the tombstones. He narrowed his eyes and scanned the cemetery – it appeared empty, but last time, he and Hermione had been spied upon by Voldemort's snake, Nagini.

When he was satisfied that no one was there, he swallowed another mouthful of whiskey. He was already feeling pleasantly warm, Harry was pleased to note. "Dad," he said forcefully, "you could also help me with your best mate. You know, Sirius Black? My supposed godfather who has been out of Azkaban for almost an entire year and hasn't once stopped in for a chat?"

Thinking of Sirius made the ache in his heart, which he knew would not go away no matter how much liquor he consumed, grow stronger. He glared at the bottle in his hand for a little while, and realized that the invisibility cloak had fallen off of him. He pulled it up over himself again, looking around warily.

He moved closer and traced the outlines of their names and birthdates. He lingered over the etched date of death: October 31st, 1981. The day that Harry's life had changed forever, when the first part of the prophecy had been enacted and he had been marked for death. "*I miss you,*" he said, and he did not like how his voice sounded so much like a child's. "I'm so sorry – I wish I could've..." but he could not choke the words out. How could he tell his parents that he had gone back to save everyone else but them?

"The last enemy that shall be defeated is death," Harry said softly. He brushed away the tears that were now falling freely down his face. "I think I understand that a little better now."

Harry bent over and picked up the snacks he had left strewn on the ground. "I'll come back," he promised. "Maybe I'll bring Ginny, too. And Ron – although he might hate me too, for effing everything up."

He wandered back to the cottage, in no particular hurry. Every once in a while he stopped to take another sip of whiskey. Night had fallen while he had spent time at his parents' graves, and the air had an ominous feeling to it that meant that it would begin to snow at any moment. No sooner had he entered the privacy of the cottage – and he immediately suspected that Dumbledore knew where he was and had been watching him – than the phoenix Patronus, which was becoming all too familiar a sight, appeared.

"HARRY POTTER, COME TO HOGWARTS AT ONCE!"

Guess he hasn't been watching me, Harry thought. The messages had become increasingly angry and worried. Dumbledore apparently still did not know what had happened, as just two days before he said that he had received a disturbing message from the Weasleys. Harry could guess what it was: Mr. and Mrs. Weasley did not want to allow contact between Harry and Ginny.

He flopped down on the couch, opened a bag of chips and popped a handful into his mouth. He washed it down with whiskey. He slowed down the drinking for a while, and stared into the empty hearth, his mood becoming steadily darker. He wished he could go back in time to just before Mrs. Weasley had barged through the door and demanded that he get away from her daughter.

By the time the snow had stopped and the moon had fully risen, Harry had begun seriously drinking again. It didn't help the gaping wound in his chest. Every time he closed his eyes he could see the rage and hatred on Mrs. Weasley's face, and he could hear the chill in Mr. Weasley's voice echoing in his head... *Get out of the Burrow... Get out... Get out... You aren't welcome here...*

Why hadn't Ginny sent another message to him? Why was it only Dumbledore sending the messages? He knew with absolute certainty that Ginny was not angry with him... Ron, now, was probably furious. But Ginny couldn't be.

"Where are you, Ginny?" he asked when the silence became too much to bear and he had to hear the sound of someone's voice.

Things became a bit fuzzy after that. Harry rose to his feet after hours of sitting, and had to catch himself to keep from falling over. He took another drink and noticed, with some surprise, that the bottle only had about a third left. *I need my wand*, he thought, despite the fact that he had not picked it up since the first night he was here. He set the bottle very carefully on the floor, knelt down, and reached under the couch. It took him several tries to find it, and several tries to get up again with the bottle in one hand and his wand in the other.

He stood uncertainly in the middle of the sitting room. Which way should he go? The front or the back? He decided to go out the front

door because it was much closer, and he was fairly certain that his legs would carry him there.

He managed, though he had to push himself off the walls at times. The colder air felt good on his flushed body. He pitched forward as he crossed the threshold, and he almost dropped his bottle. "Don't do that, Harry," he said out loud. "That would be stupid."

He closed the door, propped himself up against it, and took another swig. He looked up at the stars – *have they always moved like that?* – and felt another surge of anger. "Hey, stars," he said, "got any effing prophecies for me tonight? I could use another one." He squinted at them, but it made him feel queasy to watch them move around like that.

His gaze fell upon the spot where, if he moved close to it, the sign would appear. He stumbled down the path toward it. It rose up, just as he had known it would, and he leaned up against it. He felt a lump in his throat, and took another pull from the bottle to stop the tears. Everything crashed down on him... the look on Mrs. Weasley's face... the things Mr. Weasley had said... the conversation he had overheard... that damn article that Umbridge wrote... the fact that he had lost his surrogate family, and the closest thing he had to parents since he was one year old...

"I want a sweater," he said. *But I'm never going to get one... never, never, never.*

He squinted at the sign, and could not help but notice that there were far fewer messages, and all of them were old. *People probably don't want to support the future Dark Lord*, Harry thought bitterly. His sudden rage choked him.

He lifted his wand, fully intending to blast the sign away and damn the consequences, but the shuffle of feet distracted him.

"IS THAT YOU, VOLDEMORT, YOU EVIL SON OF A BITCH?" Harry shouted. The small part of his mind that wasn't completely drunk told him he was acting like a lunatic; Voldemort was still in Albania, and he wouldn't return to England for another six months. But that part of

him was tiny, and became smaller still when he took another drink. "COME OUT! TRY TO KILL ME, YOU BASTARD! I HATE YOU!"

The footsteps paused and he heard a swift intake of breath.

"THAT'S RIGHT," Harry continued. He then swore loudly and incoherently for what felt like several hours, but he could not seem to stop himself. "FINISH THE JOB!" He said finally. Lights were starting to come on in the neighboring houses, but he didn't care if the Muggles heard him. If Voldemort killed him now, the Ministry could deal with Obliviating them. "OR ARE YOU STILL A COWARD —"

There was a bang, and his voice cut off abruptly. He was still shouting, but he could not hear a sound. Was Voldemort trying to stop him from cursing him? His chest swelled with outrage, and he wanted to kill him, but he couldn't seem to move. He dropped his bottle and it shattered, spraying his shoes and the hem of his robes with whiskey. He felt himself wavering, and put his hand out to catch himself on the sign, but it wasn't where he put it and he pitched sideways.

Strong arms caught him before he fell over, and suddenly he was ushered forward, stumbling more than walking, away from the cottage and down the street.

"My wand," he tried to say, but no words came out.

"Keep walking, Harry, it's all right." The voice was low, and sounded familiar, but it wasn't Voldemort. Voldemort had a high voice, and he would never, ever help Harry walk anywhere. Maybe it was Mr. Weasley. He might have decided to forgive Harry... but no, Mr. Weasley hated him now...

It's not all right, Harry wanted to say.

In what seemed like no time at all, whoever it was that helped Harry stay upright, was banging on the door to another cottage. It opened immediately.

"—heard him shouting—"

“—had to silence him, the Muggles heard him too—“

“—was about to go over there myself, but then I saw you—“

Harry tried to keep track of what they were saying, but it took too much effort, and he only registered snatches of the conversation. Someone small grabbed his arm, and it was flung over frail shoulders. Wherever he was, it was very dark.

“—didn’t know anyone had the courage to talk about Voldemort like that, I couldn’t help but let him go on a bit—“

“—do you think he’s mad like some people say?”

“No,” Harry said, and was glad to find that his vocal chords were working again. “I’m not mad.”

“He’s not mad,” that familiar voice said. Harry wished he weren’t quite so drunk; maybe he could place it if he were sober. “He’s drunk – he was guzzling a bottle of whiskey, and it was almost empty. And I suspect he’s in quite a lot of pain. He visited Lily’s and James’ graves today.”

Harry opened his eyes and realized that the room was brightly lit – and spinning quite a lot – and it had only seemed dark because he had forgotten that he’d squeezed them shut. He still could not tell who was talking about him; someone had removed his glasses.

“Glasses?” Harry slurred. Someone put them back on his face. A very old woman was staring at him. She looked a little familiar...

“GET AWAY FROM ME, NAGINI!”

“What the—Harry, stop!”

The man grabbed him, pinning his arms to his side. Harry stared at Bathilda Bagshot, and then realized that she probably didn’t have a great snake inside her neck yet. “Sorry, Mrs. Bagshot.” He turned his head with much effort, and came face to face with a man he knew very well indeed.

“*Padfoot*,” he said in an anguished voice. “*Where have you been?*”

And then he started to cry, and he did not know whether the tears came from the large amount of liquor he had consumed, or whether he was just so happy to see Sirius Black again, who had arrived just when Harry had needed him most, when he had felt like everyone he cared about the most had turned their backs on him.

“I needed you,” Harry said. “Why didn’t you find me sooner?”

“I didn’t know if you’d want me to find you, Harry,” Sirius said.

“Don’t be stupid,” he said. “You’re my godfather.” And that was the last thing he remembered before he passed out.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry dropped Sirius’ arm and leaned away to vomit in the street and not on his godfather. *I hate Apparition.*

“Apparating with a hang-over is not fun, is it?” Sirius said, too cheerfully. Harry was desperately grateful to have found his godfather again, but he spoke too loud, and he was too damn happy.

“I’m not hung-over,” Harry said weakly.

“Still drunk then?”

“Sirius,” Harry said, “if you have any mercy at all, you would take me to the nearest place that sells hang-over remedies. I’d even try Muggle ones, I swear.”

“Ah, no,” Sirius said. “You’ve got to learn this lesson the hard way.”

“Where’d you learn that one? Voldemort?” Harry asked. “I’m suffering here...”

“Actually, it was your grandfather,” Sirius told him. “James and I had to learn this the hard way, and so do you. And judging how livid Dumbledore’s Patronus sounded, I thought it best to take you straight to Hogwarts.”

Harry had awoken that morning by Sirius prodding him, and telling him that he needed to wash quickly, and that they were going to Hogwarts. The sun had poked him hard in the eyes, and even the sound of rushing water had been far too much for his sensitive ears. When he'd finally emerged from Bathilda Bagshot's small bathroom, Sirius had thrust a cup of tea at him, handed him his wand, bewitched the trunk he had retrieved from Harry's parents' house to make it fit in his pocket, and had taken him to Hogsmeade.

"Hand me my invisibility cloak, please," Harry said. When Sirius eyed him suspiciously – he evidently thought that Harry was a flight risk – he added, "Do you really think that I want McGonagall or the other professors to see me like this? I won't run."

"You've apparently been hiding from Dumbledore," Sirius pointed out. "And judging by the mess you made at your parents' house, you've been successful at it for a while."

"I'm not the only one who's been hiding from Dumbledore," Harry accused. "You've been missing for almost a year."

"I had no idea that you wanted to see me so badly," Sirius said quietly. "I've lived with the fact that I basically killed your mother and father –"

"No, you didn't," Harry said so sharply that his head throbbed. He winced. "Pettigrew betrayed my parents. And besides..."

"Besides...?"

"You'll know soon enough," Harry said darkly. "It's me that needs your forgiveness, trust me."

The walk from Hogsmeade to Hogwarts was long and slow and very painful. The Entrance Hall was pleasantly dark, and Harry sighed with relief. The weak winter sun had been far, far too bright. It was empty and quiet, though not for long, as Harry heard footsteps. He turned and saw the only person he wanted to run into: Remus Lupin.

He stopped halfway down the stairs and stared through Harry (as he was invisible) at Sirius. The silence swelled, and Remus made a convulsive movement, as if he were about to run. Harry did not

understand why Remus dreaded seeing Sirius, but he had to do something.

He pulled off the cloak enough to reveal his head. "Don't you dare run away."

"*Harry?*" Remus all but shouted. "Where have you been? The whole castle's been worried – are you ill? You look very unwell."

"If you call being half drunk and half hung-over 'ill,'" Sirius said.

Remus narrowed his eyes. "You let a thirteen year old get drunk?"

Sirius held up his hands. "Don't blame me. He did it all by himself, I was only there for the end of it, when he was calling Voldemort some very nasty names."

Remus looked bewildered.

"I'm coming to your office now," Harry said carefully. He had that horrible feeling in the back of his throat, like he was going to be sick again.

"Uh," Remus said.

"You know," Harry said. "I need to talk to you. And Sirius."

"You're going to see Dumbledore," Sirius said firmly. "We can talk to Remus later."

"That's what I meant," Harry said. "Remus, I need to talk to you. It's okay if we do it in Dumbledore's office... it's probably for the best..."

Remus raised his eyebrows at the familiar address, but Harry didn't care. He pulled the cloak back over his head. "Can one of you levitate me to Dumbledore's office?"

"What did I tell you about learning your lesson?" Sirius asked, but he was grinning as he drew his wand. "Just this once. And only because we'll get there faster."

Harry suspected that he dozed off a little, because one moment he was reveling in the sensation that he was resting on some giant bed of air, and the next they were halfway to Dumbledore's office. The silence was so thick that he suspected that it would take a rather large Severing Charm to cut it. Why weren't they embracing each other like brothers? The Marauders (not counting that bastard Wormtail) had once been as close of friends as Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna.

"Will you help me make my own Marauder's Map?" Harry asked suddenly.

"You know about the Marauder's Map?" Remus asked with great surprise. "Did you tell him about it, Sirius?"

"No," Sirius said slowly. "He called me 'Padfoot' as soon as he saw me, too."

Harry did not want to start this conversation on the stairs, so he ignored their stares, and he didn't say anything. Instead, he groaned. "Dumbledore is going to be *very* angry with me."

"Going to be?" Sirius said.

"I think that Professor Dumbledore will be relieved to see that you are safe," Remus said at the same time.

"Albus is very angry with Harry," Sirius told him. "He sent a message to Harry this morning that rattled the windows in old Bathilda Bagshot's cottage."

"Harry, why didn't you come back to Hogwarts?" Remus asked.

"I didn't want to."

Apparently Remus could not argue with that, for he said nothing further, and all too soon they were standing in front of the gargoyle that guarded the headmaster's private office. "Lemon drops," Remus said firmly. It sprung away. It took some maneuvering to get Harry down again, and he ended up rapping his hand sharply against the stone wall.

“Ouch!”

“Sorry,” Sirius said. “You might want to take that cloak off now.”

Harry did not want to lose the protection that the cloak offered just yet. “Dumbledore might have another professor in there.”

Remus rapped sharply on the door, and at Dumbledore’s “Enter,” he pushed it open. Harry sidled in behind him. Sirius slid in behind Harry; it appeared that he also did not want to see Dumbledore. Harry felt a lump in his throat that was not entirely due to the fact that the moving stairs had nearly made him vomit again.

“Remus, I – *Sirius?*” Dumbledore sounded surprised. “Where in Merlin’s name have you been?”

“Er,” Sirius said. “I’ve been around...”

Harry remained silent. *I’m not being a coward*, he assured himself. *I just don’t want Dumbledore to see me like this.*

“I expect your godson will be quite pleased to see you,” Dumbledore said pleasantly. “Although it remains to be seen if he will return to this school. He went missing almost two weeks ago.”

“He did seem pleased to see me in fact,” Sirius said. There was a lot of pain in his voice; if he still believed that Harry should hate him for what Wormtail did, Harry was going to throttle him. Sirius reached over and pulled Harry’s invisibility cloak off.

There was a stunned silence. Harry looked at the ground, he looked at the portraits, he looked at the hearth; he looked anywhere but at Dumbledore. The room spun, and he closed his eyes. His stomach rolled. “Basin,” he said weakly, and he sat down on a chair.

“Harry,” Sirius said, shoving the bucket he’d conjured between Harry’s knees, “learned the danger of drinking large amounts of whiskey last night.”

There was movement, and a whooshing sound, and Dumbledore called into the Floo, "Severus, Harry's here," there was a pause, then, "Sirius Black as well. Bring one of your hang-over potions, please."

"*Severus Snape?*" Sirius said incredulously. "What's *he* doing here?"

"He is the Potions Master," Dumbledore said. "And our ally."

"Sirius," Harry murmured. "Snape is a... friend."

"He is," Dumbledore confirmed. "Please try not to let him antagonize you too much. We need the both of you."

Sirius remained silent.

Severus appeared moments later, gripping a small bottle, the likes of which Harry had been longing to see all morning. "This is the best I could find, Dumbledore."

Harry could feel Snape staring at him, so he studied at the bottom of the bucket very carefully.

"I would like to know," Sirius reached over and clasped Harry's shoulder, "why my godson felt the need to get blind, stinking drunk last night."

"Your godson?" Snape said smoothly. Harry groaned. "You haven't tried to contact Potter all year."

"Don't tell me that *you* were expecting me to show up too?"

"Everyone wanted you to show up," Harry said as firmly as he could. "Snape... the remedy... I'm begging you."

"Should I withhold it until we get some answers?" Snape asked Dumbledore.

"I got kicked out of the Burrow," Harry said sullenly.

"We know," Snape said.

"The Burrow?" Sirius asked.

“Two of Harry’s best friends live there,” Remus murmured. “Harry was supposed to spend the Christmas holidays with them, but he... left.”

“I was told that I wasn’t wanted there anymore,” Harry said. “After I...”

“Tell us what happened, and you get to drink this,” Snape waved the bottle near his face.

“Go on, Harry,” Sirius said.

Harry looked between the two of them, stunned. “Do you have any idea how strange it is to hear the two of you agreeing on anything?”

“Don’t plan on it happening again,” Snape said. “And stop stalling.”

Harry licked his lips. “I... Ginny... she wanted to give me an early, you know, Christmas present.” The implications of that were not lost on the other four.

“Ginny’s only twelve years old, Harry,” Remus said quietly, but Harry could hear the reproach quite clearly. Harry flushed.

“That was very dangerous of you to let that happen at the Burrow,” Dumbledore said. “But I expect you already know that.”

“It was very wrong of him to let it happen anywhere,” Remus said solidly. “She’s very, very young. Sex at that age —”

“We didn’t!” Harry said loudly. “We didn’t have sex. I swear... it was only... only under her shirt. And... she had her hand... then Mrs. Weasley caught us, and Mr. Weasley told me to get out, and that I was no longer welcome at the Burrow.”

Snape thrust the bottle into his hand. Harry stared at it a moment, opened it, and drained it. His head immediately began to clear. He desperately hated the fact that something that should have been very private, and just between him and Ginny, was being paraded out in front of basically everyone he cared about.

“I just couldn’t help it,” Harry said helplessly.

“You said that you were going to wait until she was fourteen,” Dumbledore said. “But if you absolutely couldn’t wait, couldn’t you have... exchanged gifts while you were still here?”

“Why would Harry tell you when he was going to have sex?” Sirius asked, confused.

Remus sputtered. “What is going on here? Are you actually saying that you would permit Harry and Ginny to have sex? Ginny isn’t even a teenager, and Harry just barely is.”

“Harry and Ginny are a special case, as I assume you will know momentarily,” Dumbledore said. “I assume that you want them to know?”

“Yes,” Harry said.

Dumbledore got up from behind his desk again, and opened the cupboard door. He brought out the Pensieve and placed it down carefully. He siphoned off the memories that already swirled, and put them into several glass bottles. Harry felt a pang of guilt when he realized that Dumbledore had probably been searching his memories, trying to find Harry.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said. “I couldn’t face coming back here.”

“Where were you, incidentally?” Snape asked.

“He’d been living in James’ and Lily’s house,” Sirius said.

Remus knit his brows. “But... doesn’t it still have a hole in it where...?”

“I didn’t care,” Harry said.

“He didn’t care about much of anything last night,” Sirius informed the rest. “When I found him, he was screaming obscenities at me – he thought I was Voldemort. And when I took him to Bathilda Bagshot’s – her house was closer than the house I bought – he got a good look at her, and screamed something about Nagini, and jumped at her.”

Snape snorted.

"It was an honest mistake," Harry said defensively. "I was drunk and confused."

"What did Bathilda say?" Dumbledore asked. "If this got out..."

"She won't say anything," Sirius said. "I asked her not to, and she's always been fond of Harry."

Harry's stomach clenched. "The Weasleys were supposed to be fond of me too," he said through gritted teeth. "And look how that's just turned out." He tried to force the bitterness away, but it choked him.

"Harry, if you did touch their daughter—"

"I LOVE HER!" Harry shouted. "And they didn't even trust me before that. Arthur Weasley didn't want to be *tainted* by me; he said so last summer."

He stood up and placed his wand to his temple.

"Harry, no!" Remus and Sirius shouted at once.

"I'm not going to do myself in," Harry said. "You need to see my memories. Sirius," he turned toward the other man. "Before you see this... I'm *begging* you to forgive me. It was my fault that you spent an extra year and a half in Azkaban. And I know... I know it was terrible. But please."

Harry looked away. He did not think he could bear it if Sirius turned his back on him as well. He didn't think he could do this without him; he wasn't even sure that he could do it without the Weasleys. Long streams of memories the color of molten silver flowed from his temple to his wand. When he was satisfied that he had enough to explain what was going on, he swirled it in the Pensieve. He'd added a few more memories than he had planned, mainly for Sirius' benefit, to show him how sorry he really was.

"This is going to take you a while," Harry said. "But we'll be right here; I'm sure you'll have questions."

Remus and Sirius looked at him for a long time. Then, stepped forward at the same time, and fell into Harry's memories of the future.

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Authors Note:

Hi. I know, I generally tend to do these when I complete the year-long story arcs... but damn, this chapter was so hard to write. I feel so bad for Harry. I've known that this would happen when I first started thinking about this story (last month), and I knew that it would break my heart. Unfortunately, it had to happen.

I hope you guys don't think that I hate the Weasleys. I really, really don't. They're definitely in the wrong about Harry, but (and I hope I'm not the only one who thinks so) I don't think their reaction to him is truly unbelievable.

Any and all feedback is welcome, by the way – especially for this chapter, which was very painful for me. No, I'm not begging for reviews; I'm quite stunned that I've got 242 (at this moment), and no matter how few I get, this story will continue to be written. But I do admit that I love the questions and responses that I've gotten. Thank you, and I'll see you at the next update!

Chapter 15 – Interludes : Ron and Sirius

RON WEASLEY

Ron stomped out of the bathroom, looking down at his blistered hands with disgust. That had not been a pleasant experience, and he hoped his mum would hurry up with the healing salve. He found Harry up in his room – Ron realized with a pang that Harry did not feel very comfortable with his family. Ron wasn't even sure if Harry had wanted to come to the Burrow at all, and reckoned he did because of Ginny.

One of his hands slammed against the wall on his way in the attic room that was his domain, and he stifled a yelp. Anger at Lockhart rose up inside him. Even Harry thought that Lockhart was pretty harmless; and, Ron had to admit, he'd had plenty of laughs about the magical moron in the last few months. But he'd slowly realized that Lockhart was going to be a threat.

Sure, he wasn't a Death Eater. But neither was that bitch Umbridge, not really, and just look at the damage she'd caused with that stupid article. And he knew – he *knew* – that despite his oh-so-sweet words to that hag from Witch Weekly, Lockhart was not the type to forgive the way Ron and Harry had humiliated him.

"Listen, Harry," Ron said, staring at his hands and grimacing. His mum was having a go at his dad, and he didn't think she'd be up anytime soon. "I reckon we should kill Lockhart."

"Ron! Not here!" Harry said in just about the loudest whisper Ron had ever heard. Honestly, Harry was getting a little paranoid.

"No one's listening," he rolled his eyes. "You worry too much. I think Lockhart's going to screw everything up."

"I know you don't like the fact that you're getting hate mail—"

Ron shook his head. Like he really cared about the hate mail? He'd mostly had fun with it, entertaining other Gryffindors with the way he lit it on fire. Sure, having giant blisters all over his hands for hours wasn't exactly pleasant, but Ron liked to think he had a bit more

sense than to kill someone over it. "It's not about that. He's very popular, you know. And once things really start to happen, I reckon he'll make trouble for us."

"You really think we should kill him?" Harry asked.

Unless a better solution could be found, yes. Ron didn't like killing, but he wasn't going to let some greedy bastard ruin everything they were trying to achieve. Maybe they could do something else, though. "Or at least put him in the permanent spell damage ward," Ron said, though he did not want to think about how they'd achieve that. "He's a threat to our plans, Harry. I know it. He almost effed everything up last year, almost ruined everything we're trying to do, and I don't like the idea of letting him try again."

Harry stared at him, and Ron started to feel a bit uncomfortable. Harry definitely had a way of making him feel like his head was being probed. He wondered if he'd learned that particular trick from Dumbledore. But he didn't back away from the scrutiny. This was too important; Ron knew he was right about Lockhart.

Harry stood up abruptly. "I'm going to talk to Ginny," he announced. "I'll tell her to meet us up here tonight after everyone's asleep. And then we'll ask Dumbledore if he can think of a way of doing this without... you know."

Ron did know, and if anyone could figure out a way to take a man out of commission without doing something that would haunt them forever, it was Dumbledore. He felt a great sense of relief. Maybe they could even ask Hermione about it; sometimes Ron thought that she was just as smart as Dumbledore. But a lot prettier...

Ron did not like how pale and tired she looked all the time, though. She had taken on far too many classes and, despite those impressive brains of hers she was having trouble keeping up. Sometimes, when he looked at her in the common room, glassy-eyed with exhaustion, he wanted to kick himself for being so insensitive last time around. He tried to make up for it now, though, and he felt like the richest man in the world when she beamed at him for bringing her a cup of tea, or refilling her ink bottle before she'd noticed it had gotten low.

He loved the fact that he was falling in love with her all over again.

Angry footsteps interrupted his thoughts, though he was glad to hear them. *Finally*, he thought. *Damn blisters smell foul*.

His mother pushed open the door. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, “Thanks, Mum, I—“

“Where is Harry?” she asked in a dangerously quiet voice. Her lips were trembling with rage, and she did not look directly at him, but stared at a point on the wall directly over his shoulder.

“Uh,” Ron said. *Something is seriously wrong here*. Dread coiled in his stomach.

“Tell us where Harry is, Ron,” his dad said.

“Why?” he asked belligerently, stalling for time while he tried to figure this out.

“I think you know why, Ronald Weasley. Tell—us—where—he—is—NOW!”

Despite the fact that he was technically in his thirties, he couldn't bring himself to disobey his mum – not when she had *that* tone in her voice. “I – uh – I think he went to talk to Ginny.”

“Stay in here, Ron,” his father said. “Do not leave this room.”

Ron wondered for a mad instant whether the Burrow was under attack, and they were trying to get Harry out, get him to safety. But his parents were furious, not frightened, and before he could ask him just what the hell was going on, they'd left.

What the bloody hell is going on?

There was a loud crash from several floors below, and then he heard his mum yelling, and Ginny screaming, but he couldn't make out the words. Ron got up from the bed upon which he'd been sitting – he'd felt a little too confused to move, and tried to leave his room. But one of them had put up a magical barrier, and he was effectively locked in.

He stood there for a moment; everything felt so surreal that he was rooted to the spot. Shaking his head to clear it of the cobwebs, he strode over to the window, not even sure what he could do. He looked out—

Harry was dragging his trunk, and making steady progress down the drive. His shoulders were bent from more than physical weight, and Ron felt a great sense of outrage. His own parents had kicked Harry out of the Burrow? *What the bloody hell is going on?*

Several tense moments passed before he once again heard footsteps stomping up the stairs. He whirled around.

“What the bloody hell have you done to Harry?” He demanded. He took a good look at his mother and father and knew that he had never seen them this angry. Still. He was pretty damn angry himself. “Did you just kick him out of the Burrow?”

They both stared at him.

Ron started to feel a bit nervous about the way they were staring at him. He wasn’t like Harry or Dumbledore or Hermione, and this was one of those times when people completely, utterly baffled him. “Look, if this is about the car—“

“It’s not about the car,” his dad said. His voice was too quiet, and Ron figured he probably shouldn’t have tried to make a joke. “Sit down. Now.”

Ron sat.

“We have several things that we need to discuss with you,” his dad said. “First. Did you know that the boy you’ve brought into our home numerous times had been *taking advantage of your little sister?*”

Shit. “No,” Ron said honestly. Thankfully, Harry and Ginny generally tried to keep the details of their physical relationship away from him. And judging by how much time Harry spent in the shower, they weren’t doing too much. His mind raced. How had they found out? Unless... did they do something stupid today? But Mum and Dad had already been furious before Harry’d been alone with Ginny.

"You'd better be telling the truth, young man," his mum said, her lips trembling with fury. "If I find out that you *knew* and didn't do anything... Ron, she's your little sister."

"I know they fancy each other," Ron said.

"WHAT WE JUST SAW WAS A LOT MORE THAN 'FANCYING'!" she shouted. "SHE WAS ALMOST *NAKED*! MY DAUGHTER! TWELVE YEARS OLD!"

"Molly," his dad said. "We can talk about this in a moment."

Ron fiddled with his wand, wondering when the world had gone to hell. This only made things worse. His mother wrestled the wand out of his hands, and threw it across the room where it bounced off the wall.

"WHAT WERE YOU DOING WITH THE WAND, RON?" she asked shrilly. "MAYBE YOU WANT TO KILL *US* THE SAME WAY YOU WANT TO KILL LOCKHART!"

The floor dropped beneath his feet. "I don't want to kill Lockhart," Ron said. It was only half a lie.

"Your mother heard you and Harry," his dad said. "You – threatening to kill a man."

"You should have listened to him when he told you to be quiet," his mum said. "Although I'm glad I found out."

Ron thought very quickly. Just how much had she heard? Obviously not the part about talking to Dumbledore, but... he took a risk. "Mum, look at my hands!" he held them out for her, and was glad that they were blistered and bleeding.

"THAT IS NO EXCUSE!"

"I THINK IT'S A PRETTY DAMN GOOD ONE!" Ron shouted back, anger coming to his defense. "THAT STUPID GIT SET ALL THE WITCHES IN BRITAIN ON ME!"

“Do not speak to your mother like that,” his dad said. “And you’d better tell us the truth. What sort of ‘plan’ is it that you’re worried about, hm?”

Ron thought furiously. What the hell could he say? *Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn.* He’d never been that good about thinking of a good lie under pressure and he couldn’t tell them the truth, damn it, not yet. They waited in silence, but as the moments ticked by whatever chance he had of making them believe his lie grew slimmer and slimmer.

What would Harry say? He asked himself desperately. And, thinking of Harry, he grew even angrier. Then it came to him. “The plan... he...”

“You’d better tell us now, Ron.”

I’m sorry, Harry, he thought. “No one... he hasn’t got many people who trust him. We want to, uh, change that. We thought...” He felt slightly ashamed at the fact that he was capitalizing on something that hurt Harry deeply. The back of his neck felt warm, and he hoped his parents didn’t notice.

“YOU THINK THAT KILLING PEOPLE IS GOING TO CHANGE HIS IMAGE!” his mum shouted. She rounded on his dad, and she looked quite demented. “This is exactly why we were worried, Arthur. Exactly.”

“I ALREADY TOLD YOU THAT I DON’T WANT TO KILL LOCKHART!”

“YOU THINK I DON’T KNOW WHEN YOU’RE LYING!” she shrieked. “IT FRIGHTENED ME OUT OF MY MIND TO HEAR MY OWN SON TALKING – TALKING ABOUT –“

“The truth is, Ron,” his dad said, when his mother sputtered into silence. “We’ve been worried about you ever since you met Harry Potter. You’ve *changed*, Ron. Or do you think we haven’t noticed?”

“Yeah?” Ron asked. He couldn’t help the sarcasm in his voice anymore than he could stop himself from flushing when he was

embarrassed. “Well, so have you. The parents I *used* to have would *never* have kicked a thirteen year old orphan out of the house – right – before – Christmas!”

“HE WAS TOUCHING GINNY!”

“YOU WERE GOING TO KICK HIM OUT ANYWAY!” Ron shouted. “Mum, Dad,” he said pleadingly. “I don’t know what happened with Ginny, but he really loves her, and she loves him.”

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say. His father’s bald spot turned an ugly shade of red. “You listen to me,” he hissed. Ron took a step back. “You are very young, so you obviously don’t know what it’s like to be a parent. But what Harry did to Ginny was unforgivable, and if you say one more thing to defend his actions, you will *not* be going back to Hogwarts.”

Ron opened his mouth to tell him to get Ginny up here, and as *her* if she was upset that Harry’d touched her. It was likely that she was the one who started it in the first place. But the look in his father’s eyes stopped him cold. Maybe he should Obliviate them; make them forget that they’d seen and heard what had happened. But as soon as that idea came, he knew that he couldn’t do that. Not after seeing Harry after Lockhart had done it to him.

“If you think that touching a twelve year old girl is love,” his mum said. “Then you don’t know the first thing about it.”

Always and always. The words thundered through his entire body like something physical. Ron, who had never been at a loss for words, could not think of anything to say. And despite the fact that his heart had already broken long ago, he was surprised when he felt it crack anew.

“You’re wrong about Harry,” he said, but he didn’t think they heard him. And then he lay down on his bed and turned away from them. He felt deeply relieved when they left. He loved his parents, he really did. Nothing would change that; it was *always and always* no matter what... at least he hoped so. The meanest part of him looked forward to the day that his parents would find out the truth – if that day came,

he wasn't so sure now. They were really going to have to eat their words.

His parents maintained a watchful silence until a few days after Christmas. Ron hadn't had a chance to talk to Ginny alone at all, but she looked miserable. He figured that she'd fought just as much as he had, because she'd whispered in his ear after breakfast that first morning that her wand had been taken away.

“Percy, Fred, George,” his dad said after dinner two days after Christmas. “Go to your rooms. Your mother and I need to talk to your brother and sister.”

Ron followed Ginny into the sitting room.

"We have decided to send you back to Hogwarts," his mum said.

Ron and Ginny exchanged glances. *They'd really been considering not sending us?*

“And you have Dumbledore, and your brother Percy to thank,” his dad said grimly. “You are not to spend time alone with Harry Potter – either of you. Percy has agreed to ensure that this does not happen, and the teachers will as well.”

Ginny stifled a small sob.

“Now,” his mum said. “We want your word that you will follow this rule. If you don’t, we *will* keep both of you home. Do you understand?”

"Yes," Ginny said. "I swear."

"Me too," Ron lied immediately. What other choice did they have?

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SIRIUS BLACK

Sirius was floundering. He had been ever since he'd been released from Azkaban, but now it was even worse. He'd been worried for a while that he had gone mad from being exposed to dementors for so

long. Even with his animagus ability that helped to deaden the pain, the nightmares he'd had every night since his release only increased it. But in the course of a day, ever since he had watched Harry visit his parents' graves, everything had shifted completely around. And as he stared around at Albus Dumbledore (who had basically just given a thirteen year old permission to sleep with a twelve year old), Severus Snape (who did not seem to hate him, had, in fact, expected him to show up long before this), Remus Lupin (who could not even look at him; he obviously blamed Sirius for James' and Lily's deaths), and Harry Potter.

He was not quite certain that Harry was sane. Not that it mattered a bit – Sirius felt mildly ashamed that he rather looked forward to having a godson as mad as he was. What mattered was the fact that Harry was in a large amount of pain. He'd seen it for himself last night when he had watched Harry scream at Voldemort. And he'd seen it today when Harry had told them what happened at the Burrow, and when he had begged Sirius to forgive him.

He looked at the memories swirling in the Pensieve, and felt slightly fearful of what he was about to see. He took a deep breath and, with Moony right beside him, plunged in.

He cried out in shock, and Moony gripped his arm so tightly it hurt.

It was a memory of a battlefield. They arrived just in time to see Voldemort fall and someone who looked a hell of a lot like Harry Potter, but that was impossible because it was a man and not a teenager. He was covered in blood, and standing in the center of a large pile of bodies.

"His boggart!" Remus breathed.

The scene shifted before they had adjusted to it. They were in the dining room of a house that seemed rather cold and barren. That same man who looked like Harry, who looked like James, sat drinking with two other people. They all looked broken and horrible. Something moved out of the corner of his eye, and he turned to see a house-elf that looked a lot like Kreacher.

“Kreacher?” Sirius said in disbelief, forgetting that he could only be heard by Moony.

“That’s Ron and Ginny Weasley...” Moony said, shocked. “What the hell...?”

“What if we could travel through time?” The dark-haired man said.

Sirius could only watch, utterly shocked, when the scene shifted again, and they found themselves in the familiar office of the headmaster. Except that Dumbledore wasn’t there, only his portrait; and he was telling... Harry? things that were completely impossible.

He glanced over at Moony, and saw his own shock reflected back on him. He couldn’t believe it, but he couldn’t *not* believe it, either. This was a Pensieve. There was no other explanation for seeing these memories except that they were the truth.

“NO!” A loud voice startled him. It was obviously a different memory, for things had shifted, and the people in it now wore different clothes. Harry was standing in front of the portrait looking very upset. “I’m not leaving him in there a second longer than he has to be. We’ll get Wormtail the day we get back.”

“That would be most foolish, Harry,” Dumbledore’s portrait said. “You could ruin everything if you did that.”

“I know we can’t kill Wormtail right away,” Harry’s mouth twisted into a pained grimace. “I know we’ve got to let him carry out his plans –”

“And how do you suggest he do that?”

“I dunno,” Harry said mutinously. “I could – use the Imperius Curse... or go to Azkaban myself and break him out of there.”

“You have never been able to use the Imperius Curse fully, Harry,” Dumbledore’s portrait pointed out. “You’re already going to have to use it when you reveal him, and I expect you’ll find it difficult. Not only that, but even I could not hold an Imperius Curse on someone who is in Azkaban. The curse won’t hold against dementors. The Confundus Charm is the only way to do it.”

“And after a year it starts to break down,” Harry said sourly. “I hate the idea of leaving him in there, Albus.”

“I know...”

The scene whirled away again as Sirius continued to watch. They were now in the Shrieking Shack, and he watched as he and Moony attempted to persuade three teenagers that they were not the enemy, Pettigrew was.

Moony sputtered. “That’s – I – I just bought those shoes for Christmas! Padfoot... do you think it’s true?”

“You’re convinced because of a pair of shoes?” Sirius raised his eyebrow.

“There’s no possibly way that he could have seen them,” Moony said.

The last memory they saw was an image of their own graves, and Sirius began to understand. *Prongs*, he thought, *your kid is pretty damn incredible.*

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Author’s note:

I know, I know, I’ve been doing these with alarming frequency. But I’ve had this story posted for about an hour, and the outrage is beginning to pour in.

The Weasleys are not going to be told any time soon. However, Harry will have little to no contact with the elder Weasleys. This is the last of the rather dramatic Weasley scenes for a very long time, and I believe that the next one will be rather more favorable.

I know that a lot of you are extremely frustrated with this plot line. If some of you choose to give up on this story as a result of it, I’m sorry. But the fact that the Weasleys don’t trust Harry is essential to the plot. And I will say this: Harry, Ron, and Ginny are going to be very glad

one day that they don't trust him. Also, the reason why they aren't telling the parents will (sort of) become clear in the next chapter. Try to trust me a little!

Chapter 16 – Invisible

Harry was suddenly alone in the room with Dumbledore and Snape, and he found himself wishing that he could have joined the viewing of his past with Sirius and Remus. He scratched his head, jiggled his leg, and belatedly realized that his hang-over had offered him a buffer, painful though it had been.

“Whatever it is that you think we’re going to do to you,” Dumbledore said. “You are probably wrong.”

“I screwed up,” Harry said. “Big time. And then I ran away and wallowed in misery, and didn’t tell you where I was or anything.”

“Yes,” Dumbledore said reasonably. “You made a mistake. It was bound to happen sooner or later, and this mistake is a rather more personal one. I do not mean to belittle your suffering, Harry. I cannot imagine how painful this must be for you. I have a confession to make, however. While you were in the Chamber of Secrets last year, I saw a large amount of distrust. I hoped that it would not come to this... but I suspected it would. It happened sooner than I might have thought, and for reasons that I did not expect, but...”

“I kept expecting them to... I don’t know,” Harry said. “Come around. If I did enough. And then I told myself that one day we can tell them the truth, and everything would change back to how it’s supposed to be. But if they decide not to fight, they aren’t going to know until it’s all over.” *When it’s too late.*

He hadn’t spoken those words out loud, but Dumbledore heard them all the same.

Snape scowled. “Why didn’t you Oblivate them when you had the chance? You could have made them forget your indiscretion, *and* that article. Then you’d be their precious seventh son again.”

“I’m not going to force anyone to love me,” Harry said. “And I refuse to Oblivate anyone. Do you have any idea how being Oblivated feels?”

"If I did," Snape said. "I'm sure I have forgotten. The Weasleys would never remember that you did it, you know. The only reason why you had negative consequences is because Lockhart did not know your special situation. And Weasley was right there to tell you that you were missing something important. All you would have to do is take care never to mention it in their presence."

Harry shook his head. "I refuse to do it. It's too much like putting them under the Imperius Curse."

"You didn't seem to have any qualms whatsoever about doing it to Wormtail," Snape pointed out.

"I don't love Wormtail," Harry told him. "Merlin, I wish I could Apparate over to the Burrow right this moment, and force them to look into the Pensieve. I really do."

"Another reasonable solution to this problem," Snape said.

"Severus," Dumbledore said.

"And you're one of the main reasons why I'm not, Professor Snape," Harry said. "Dumbledore's portrait made it quite clear that we were to give people the opportunity to choose – and before you argue, the two of you made that choice long ago. I can't force people to love me and fight with me. It's dead wrong... and it's something that Voldemort would do. Dumbledore's portrait told me all of this several times. And I made a mistake that ended with everyone dying because I didn't trust him – uh – you. Both of you. So I'm not going to do that again."

"If it's any consolation," Dumbledore said. "I agree with that wholeheartedly."

"We planned to tell them, you know," Harry said. "Right after Voldemort returns. We didn't count on the possibility that this would happen."

"While you have been... otherwise occupied," Dumbledore began delicately. "We have been attempting to discover solutions to the restrictions that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley have placed. Severus has

suggested more detentions, but I fear that would be complicated. The other professors would be sure to notice that the three of you are given detentions together.”

“Or,” Harry said. “Two of us could have detention with Professor Snape, and one of us could have it with Remus.”

“That could work,” Dumbledore said. “But again, it would be highly inadvisable to do that often. We also thought of –“

But he was interrupted by the sudden reappearance of Sirius and Remus. They were white-faced and both stared at Harry with an expression of complete and utter shock. Harry eyed them apprehensively. Sirius did not look angry, but he might still be in shock.

“I never thought I’d see the day that Sirius Black is speechless,” Snape said sardonically after a long moment of silence. “Truly, wonders never cease.”

Sirius did not even rise to the bait. He took a deep breath. “Let me get this straight,” he said in a shaky voice. “You traveled back in time?”

“Yes,” Harry said cautiously.

“Because you lost everyone you loved besides... what were their names?”

“Ron and Ginny Weasley,” Remus murmured.

“Ginny Potter,” Harry corrected. “She’s my wife.”

“Right,” Sirius nodded. The dazed look was slowly slipping off his face. “So you came back to defeat Voldemort all over again?”

“Yes,” Harry said.

“You put yourself in mortal danger – again – because you loved us?”

Where is he going with this? “Absolutely,” Harry said. “You heard me, and Ron, and Ginny. The price was too high last time. And we’re not going to pay it again.”

“Harry,” Sirius looked exasperated. “Do you have any idea... Did you honestly think that I wouldn’t forgive you?”

“You stayed in Azkaban an extra year and half because of me,” Harry felt the need to remind him of this. “I honestly tried to think of another way, any other way, but—“

“Harry,” Sirius said firmly. “I saw it in the Pensieve. Had I been you, I would’ve made the same choice, however difficult it may have been. Although I’m still not too clear on the details of why Wormtail can’t just die. We saw that you stopped us from killing him... do you still think that he deserves to live? Because we’re going to have to have a serious discussion about that if you do.”

“No,” Harry said. “Wormtail is going to die. But he has to resurrect Voldemort first.”

“And then I’m going to kill him,” Snape said smoothly.

Sirius eyed him. “Not if I get there first.”

“Snape already called it,” Harry said. Sirius looked mutinous, but he didn’t say anything. “I would consider it a favor,” Harry added, “if you would kill your cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange. Not right away, but I’ll tell you when.”

“Bellatrix?” Sirius said. “She’s in Azkaban.”

“She’ll escape,” Harry said. “But do me a favor and take her seriously this time. And if you’re anywhere near a veil, get the hell away.”

“Do I even want to know?” Sirius asked.

“That’s how you died last time,” Harry told him. “Well, the veil didn’t kill you, but she did, and you fell through it...”

“Incidentally,” Remus spoke up. “What happened to Wormtail last time?”

“I tracked him down, a friend of mine – Hermione – placed Anti-Apparition wards up so he couldn’t escape, I forced him into a duel, and killed him,” Harry said dispassionately. He’d learned from Arthur Weasley’s advice so long ago, and regretted the necessity but not the act.

Sirius looked deeply impressed.

“What are you doing to stop this from happening again?” Remus asked. “Rather, what are we going to do to stop it?”

Harry jumped right in. “Do either of you have any idea what a Horcrux is?”

“No,” they said in unison.

“It’s about the darkest sort of magic there is,” Harry told them. “Voldemort split his soul and placed it in several different objects – and we know where all of them are, but some of them we can’t get to yet. In order for Voldemort to die, they must be destroyed. He stayed alive – sort of – when the curse he tried to kill me with rebounded onto him because of it.”

“How many Horcruxes are there?” Sirius asked.

“And what are they? Where are they?” Remus added. He looked sickened and disgusted.

“Voldemort made six Horcruxes,” Harry lied. Dumbledore looked at him sharply, but did not say anything. Snape did not react at all. “Well... he actually hasn’t made the sixth yet, I don’t think. We’ve already destroyed three of them, and the next one will be rather easy to manage. But the last two will have to wait another couple of years to get. One is in the Lestranges’ vault. One will be near Voldemort, I believe. And the last one is sitting at Grimmauld Place.”

“What?” Sirius said blankly. “My parents’ house?”

“Your brother,” Harry explained, “found out about the Horcruxes. He died trying to destroy one.”

“Regulus?” Sirius said faintly.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Which brings me to my next point. Sirius, please be kind to Kreacher. He’s had a rather hard time of it. Regulus found out about the Horcruxes partly because Voldemort used Kreacher to ensure that it was protected enough. And then... Regulus took Kreacher with him when he went to retrieve it, and ordered him to leave him behind.”

“First Snape, now Kreacher?” Sirius asked incredulously. “Are you sure that Voldemort isn’t secretly our ally too?”

Harry grinned. “Well, I was saving that shock for a later date, but now that you’ve already figured it out...”

Remus snorted. “He’s got quite a bit of James in him, Sirius.”

Sirius shook his head. “Nah, even James wouldn’t have had the nerve to play the largest prank in the history of mankind against Voldemort himself.”

Dumbledore laughed a loud, booming sound that Harry didn’t think he’d ever heard before. Soon, Harry felt his own laughter bubble up inside him, and break free. He momentarily forgot about the Weasleys and the fist that clenched around his heart lightened by a degree. Remus snorted. Snape hid a smile. And Sirius looked around at them all, beaming, and some of the wasted look that came from so many years in Azkaban with the dementors seemed to slide off his face.

“You would put it that way, Padfoot,” Remus said, smiling.

Sirius’ smile changed from proud to wistful. “Have you forgiven me then, Moony?”

Remus looked shocked. “Me – forgive you? I’m the one – I should have known you’d never – I should have trusted you!”

Sirius' mouth opened and closed, and then he reached out and embraced Remus like a brother, and pounding him on the back. Harry saw that tears stood in Sirius' eyes as he pulled away, and in Remus'.

Harry rolled his own eyes. "Is that why you've been avoiding any and all talk about Sirius this past year? You didn't think he'd forgive you? You're mad."

Sirius and Remus turned to look at him, gaping. "Is this from the man who apologized for *coming back in time* to save everyone?"

"That's different!"

"Is this touching display of forgiveness and friendship done yet?" Snape asked sourly. "As for who is mad, I suspect we all are. Although I can't decide who is more so: Potter or Black."

"Speaking of mad," Dumbledore interjected. "We have several more things to discuss, not least of which is the fact that Harry is distrusted by a great many witches and wizards in the Wizarding world."

"The article?" Remus asked quietly.

"That's what began it," Dumbledore confirmed. "But circumstances unforeseen by any of us have nursed it until it has grown. What began as a spark is now a glowing ember, and I fear that unless we take great pains to stop it, it will become something beyond our control."

"But we also can't do it directly," Snape said. "We can't put an announcement in the *Daily Prophet* telling everyone that Potter is actually from the future, come to save us all from the Dark Lord. We'd all be thrown in St. Mungo's."

"And I've seen how this plays out, remember?" Harry said. "The instant Dumbledore starts backing me up, he'll be thrown out of the Wizengamot. No one believed that Voldemort was really back during my entire fifth year, and Dumbledore was painted with the same black brush that I was. We can't afford to let that happen, and I'm almost certain it would in this climate."

Harry stretched, and realized that he was becoming quite hungry. He thought longingly of the bags of chips and packets of beef jerky that he'd bought yesterday.

"When did they start believing you?" Remus asked.

"Well," Harry said. "Voldemort lured me to the Department of Mysteries – he made me think that Sirius was being tortured – because he wanted me to retrieve the prophecy. Then he couldn't resist showing up, and a lot of people saw him, including Fudge."

"Anyone care to tell me what the hell everyone is talking about?" Sirius was frustrated, Harry could tell.

Dumbledore told him about the article.

"Do you know where all that information came from?" Remus asked.

"We know it wasn't from either of us," Snape said. "We swore the Unbreakable Vow to each other that we wouldn't tell unless Potter asked it."

Something was very wrong with that statement. Harry thought furiously. He'd never actually seen the complex charm performed before, but he'd heard about it—

"Who was the third person?" Sirius furrowed his brow. "The Bonder?"

All hell pretty much broke loose after that. Dumbledore and Snape both paled and looked like figures made of wax for long moments. Then Snape stumbled, and fell against the wall. Dumbledore bent over, breathing heavily, as though he had suddenly become quite ill with a stomach ailment.

"They've been Obliviated," Harry said grimly. He knew the disorientation that came with having a Memory Charm challenged. "*Damn it.*"

Harry finally found his bed in the empty Gryffindor Tower very late that night. He ignored the persistent hunger pangs – they had not gotten around to eating, but Harry had quite forgotten about his

stomach. The discussion had gone on for hours upon hours. Sirius had performed the charm used to detect any tampering with memory, and it had been confirmed. They also could not break it, not without doing permanent damage to their minds.

It was even more infuriating trying to isolate the memories that had been taken. Snape and Dumbledore had both taken it in turns to recount the night they had made the Unbreakable Vow. Snape had no idea how he had gotten to the headmaster's office the night after Harry's parents' death. Dumbledore did not remember Snape arriving. Nor could either of them reconstruct the conversation that led to making the Vow. Harry had found himself hating Memory Charms even more.

Then they turned to debating who it could have been, and whether they were friend or foe. Harry was less inclined to think that whoever had used the charm was a friend; whoever had done this had taken too many pains to remain hidden. Snape agreed with him, but Remus had argued that if it truly was a foe, they could have done a lot more damage than that. But he'd never been Obliviated before – that they knew of. Sirius had not committed to either one, but had argued against both.

Harry rolled over in his bed, utterly exhausted. Despite his tiredness, he lay awake for another hour, wishing that Ron and Ginny were there.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry walked underneath his invisibility cloak, threading through the students in the Great Hall, careful not to bump into anyone. He had his eyes on two familiar redheads, and he did not like the slump in their shoulders, nor the way they did not look at anyone. The twins sat across from them and a little to the left; they were unusually alert, and scanned the crowd every few moments. *Probably looking for me*, Harry thought glumly.

He leaned down and inhaled the flowery scent of her hair, and murmured in her ear, "Room of Requirement. Tell Ron."

She jumped. The twins looked over at her with narrowed eyes.

“Sorry, Ginny,” Ron said easily. “Got a little excited when I saw the lamb and kicked her,” he explained.

Harry was already walking away. Ron must hate him, but at least he was protecting Ginny; it appeared that the twins were watchdogs, either appointed by Mrs. Weasley, or this was something they had taken upon themselves to do. He thought grimly of the Marauder’s Map. If the twins were keeping an eye on him, they would soon discover – if they had not already – that the Map was the best tool to do so. Which meant that they’d have to steal it from them soon. Tonight, if possible.

A large black shape eased itself from the shadows and fell into step beside Harry. “I don’t get how you always know it’s me,” Harry told Sirius. The dog just looked and gave him a doggy grin. Harry just shook his head. He was alone in the corridor now (besides Sirius) but he kept the cloak on. The last time he’d felt safe enough to do so, he’d run into Professor McGonagall almost immediately. She lectured him for what felt like several hours. She danced around the subject, but it was clear to Harry that she knew exactly what happened, and fully supported Mr. and Mrs. Weasley’s decision. Then she’d told him that if he ran away again without leaving word to anyone, she would deduct one hundred points from Gryffindor – yes, her own house.

Not wanting to feel that kind of mortification again, Harry kept his cloak on whenever he was not in the Room of Requirement, his tower room, or Dumbledore’s office.

Padfoot barked, startling Harry. Looking around, he realized that he had passed the blank section of wall that would lead to the Room of Requirement, and had Sirius not barked, he would have kept going. He smiled ruefully.

After half an hour of pacing and growing increasingly worried, the door finally creaked open, and Ron and Ginny sidled into the room. Harry eyed them warily, and they eyed him right back, just as warily. He did not like the fact that Ginny appeared to have lost weight. She looked even younger than twelve years old, and her robes appeared far too large for her small frame. Neither of them appeared to notice Sirius.

“Ginny...” he said finally. “Please don’t.”

With a small sob, she threw herself at him. “I’m so sorry, Harry, I made things so much worse than it already was.”

Harry held her just as tightly as she was holding him. “If you think,” he murmured in her ear, “that for a few wonderful minutes that wasn’t the best Christmas gift I’ve gotten for several years, you’re dead wrong. It wasn’t your fault. We share the blame.”

He looked over her head at Ron. “Ron, I’m sorry—“

He shook his head. “Don’t. It’s pretty much all my fault.”

“How do you work that one out?” Harry asked blankly.

“Mum heard us talking about Lockhart,” Ron said. “If I’d listened to you, she wouldn’t have... you know, found the two of you.”

“She heard all of it?” Harry asked, aghast. No wonder she’d been so angry before she’d even found him with Ginny.

“No,” Ron said. “She heard me talking about killing him, and how it would eff up the plan. Nothing about the permanent spell damage ward, thank Merlin. I tried to explain it away. I told them I was just angry... but they didn’t buy it, not really.”

“What did you tell them about the plan?”

Ron took a deep breath and refused to meet Harry’s eyes. “I told them,” he said uncomfortably, “that we were working to... you know, improve your image...”

Harry nodded, though it hurt a little. “They didn’t believe it, though?”

“Mum reckoned that killing people wouldn’t make people trust you,” Ron said. “I think they believed it just a little, though. They didn’t interrogate me again, at least.”

“We wanted to send you messages,” Ginny told him. “But Mum took away our wands; we only just got them back as we got on the train.”

“Did you come back here, then?” Ron asked. “We thought you might.”

“I didn’t,” Harry said. “I went to Godric’s Hollow and camped out at my parents’ old house.”

Ginny’s bright brown eyes narrowed. “The one with the hole in it? Harry... what were you thinking?”

Harry shrugged. “It seemed like the best place to be completely miserable. I wanted to wallow,” he said defensively when they both glared at him. “I’m not cracking up, I swear. Besides...” he grinned, and Ron and Ginny were startled. “It ended up being a good thing.”

He could see them both wondering how it could possibly be a good thing.

“I met an old friend,” Harry told them.

“Who?” Ron asked sarcastically. “Nagini?”

“You are so dense,” Harry laughed.

“You found Sirius!” A large smile bloomed on Ginny’s face.

“The mutt finally showed up?” Ron said incredulously. “Finally!”

“I happen to be purebred,” Sirius said loftily. “And it’s more like I found him.”

Ginny paused for a second, looking unsure, and then launched herself at Sirius. “I’m sorry, I know you don’t know me, but you have no idea how wonderful it is to see you. Did Harry tell you about us? I’m Ginny Weasley—“

“Ginny Potter,” Harry corrected her.

“He’s quite emphatic about that point,” Sirius said. He hugged Ginny back, stepped forward, and shook Ron’s hand. “And I feel like I already know you both, Harry’s talked a lot about you.”

Ron beamed. “Suddenly, Christmas doesn’t seem like it went so badly after all.”

"We can't stay for much longer," Ginny said once they had stood around grinning at each other for a while. "We're being watched, and the feast is about to end, I'm sure."

Harry shook his head. "You've got to stay for just a bit longer. Listen... we've got something to tell you."

"Albus and Snape," Sirius said grimly, "have both been Obliviated. We don't know who did it, and whoever it was knows the full prophecy, we think."

"WHAT?" Ron bellowed.

Harry caught Ginny when she stumbled against him.

Harry told them the precious little they had managed to find out for certain. All joy left their expressions, and their faces tightened with anger and fear. The Ripple Effect had not turned out to be so much of a ripple but a whirlpool.

"I think," Harry said. "I'm not sure, but I think that it was a Death Eater. Not one of the more insane ones, like Bellatrix... but I was thinking it might be Rookwood. We never really heard that much about him last time – but he worked in the Department of Mysteries, he was an Unspeakable. Or... if not him, then someone similar."

"I had my doubts at first," Sirius admitted. "But I'm beginning to think that Harry may be correct."

"But didn't this happen after Harry got rid of Voldemort?" Ron asked. "Why would a Death Eater do this if they thought he was gone?"

"Rookwood – or whoever – knew the full prophecy," Harry said grimly. "He had to have known that it hadn't been fulfilled. And maybe he figured out about the Horcruxes, like Regulus did, but he didn't find it disgusting. We don't know."

"Snape said that Rookwood pretty much kept to himself," Sirius said. "Though he wasn't the only Death Eater that did so. He claims that Rookwood was subtle enough to play a long game."

“Or it could be a Death Eater we don’t even know about,” Harry said. “Think of Wormtail – hardly anyone knew that he was giving Voldemort information. Snape didn’t even know, and Voldemort trusted him as much as he did anyone.”

“Either way,” Sirius said. “We can’t let Rookwood tell Voldemort what he may or may not know.”

“How are we going to stop him?” Ginny asked. She wrapped her arm around Harry’s waist, and he squeezed her shoulder, offering her what comfort he could.

“We haven’t quite figured that out yet,” Harry said. “We have a few years, at least, though I expect we’ll have to do it sooner rather than later. I don’t want to be worrying about it after Voldemort returns.”

Ron furrowed his brow. “Are you thinking what I think you’re thinking?”

“And what’s that?” Harry asked.

“We’re going to storm Azkaban?” Ron said.

“Pretty much, yeah,” Harry said.

“But we don’t even know if it’s that Rookwood bastard!”

“No, we don’t,” Harry admitted. “But if it *is* and he tells Voldemort... it isn’t just about the prophecy, Ron. We need Snape to be completely trusted by Voldemort.”

“And if someone has been subtle enough to sit on this secret for so long,” Sirius added. “We’re going to have to assume that they are also subtle enough to manipulate events in their favor. The goal is probably to kill Snape, and give Voldemort the fullness of the prophecy. And that can’t happen.”

Ron and Ginny gaped at him, and then gaped at Harry.

“I know,” Harry said sympathetically. “It’s a bit weird at first, seeing them getting along relatively well. I think it’s because they met again under different circumstances...”

Finally, Ron and Ginny could no longer put off leaving. Ron was just stepping through the door when Harry remembered something.

“Ron,” Harry said. “Steal the Map from the twins if you can.”

He blinked. “What do you mean *if* I can?”

Harry laughed.

He did not have a chance to laugh at much of anything at all over the next few weeks. He did not know how what had happened with Ginny came out – and he did not particularly care to know whether it was the twins or Percy who had told – but it seemed as if everyone knew. He wandered around under his invisibility cloak. It was not the harsh stares from some of the girls that drove him to hide, although those did not improve his mood. But some of the older boys looked at him appraisingly, as if they *respected* him, and sometimes they said things, if they saw him, that made Harry want to kill them.

Neville and Luna had immediately disregarded the rumors.

“You’d never hurt Ginny,” Neville said that first night he had returned. His face was bright red. Harry’s was too. “I know that.”

“Thanks, Neville,” Harry said.

Luna had taken a rather different approach when she caught him in the hall – this was when he had not yet decided to hide himself. “Poor Arthur and Guinevere,” she said sadly. “No one understands that you’re soul mates, and have been for centuries.”

“Er... thanks, Luna,” Harry said. Later, he wondered if she’d really meant that no one understood that they were actually husband and wife, and had come from the future. It was a possibility, but with Luna, he couldn’t always tell.

Hermione, however, gave him the cold shoulder for several days. She sat with Ron on the opposite side of the room from Harry during Ancient Runes, and refused to speak to him unless he asked direct questions.

That Friday, he pulled his invisibility cloak off and was shocked and gratified to see that Hermione sat right next to the seat he usually sat in. At first she didn't say anything but took furious notes that Harry hoped she would allow him to copy later. But once Professor Octavius set them to translating a series of runes, she broke the silence.

"Harry," she whispered. Her cheeks were pink. "I'm really sorry I thought... but Ginny told me last night that... well, it wasn't, you know, and that she'd... started it."

Harry nodded. "Thanks, Hermione," he said quietly. Then, because he felt extremely uncomfortable, he changed the subject. "Now what's this rune?"

Harry, Ginny, and Ron found very little time together. They generally managed on Thursdays because they all had a free period when Percy, Fred, and George did not. The Weasley brothers were very good at keeping their eyes on Ginny and Ron. Too good. But at least Ron had managed to steal the Map away, which Harry had found out the afternoon following the return of the rest of the students.

"Potter," Fred said inscrutably.

Harry didn't say anything.

"Were you in our dormitories last night?" George asked. His eyes were very hard.

"No," Harry said honestly. *Good job, Ron*, he thought.

They exchanged looks. Fred's mouth tightened. "You'd better not have been. If we find out that you were, you'll never have another peaceful day at Hogwarts again."

"Mum told us we weren't allowed to hex you," George said.

“And we don’t want to piss her off even more than she already is,” Fred said.

“Because of you,” George continued.

“But if you talk to our sister,” Fred said.

“Or even go near her,” George added.

“We will hurt you,” Fred finished.

Harry had watched them walk away. But that same hollow ache that had been in his stomach since Christmas grew a little; and he couldn’t afford to do any more wallowing, so he forced himself to ignore it. He had far more important things to think about, and he could not allow the Weasleys to distract him.

Well, except for one Weasley, but she was a pleasant distraction. And she was more a Potter than a Weasley, anyway.

One night in early February, Ginny was doing a very fine job of distracting him from all his worries. They were alone, for once, in the Room of Requirement, and a free hour stretched before them. They had already worked out a plan for retrieving the locket from Grimmauld Place and destroying it, and though it could not be done until the next Hogsmeade weekend, Harry did not feel any great sense of urgency.

So he could simply sit and enjoy the feeling of Ginny’s hand stroking his hair.

“Harry?” she broke the silence. “You meant what you said, right? About it being the best Christmas gift you’ve had in several years?”

“Of course,” Harry said immediately. “How could you even ask that?”

Her hand stilled. “Maybe because you haven’t asked for a repeat performance. I thought maybe you—”

“You think I don’t want you?” he interrupted incredulously. “You are joking?”

"You've always been very firm about there being boundaries, Harry," she pointed out. "I worried that when you saw me that horrible afternoon, you saw someone who is actually twelve years old, and you didn't think it was attractive."

"Ginny, you *felt* how attracted I was," Harry said. "And I'm that attracted to you pretty much every hour of every day."

"My body isn't exactly fully developed," Ginny pointed out. "I worried that you'd feel dirty."

"No," Harry shook his head. "I don't feel dirty. This is *you* we're talking about. I can't help desiring you because that's a part of the love I feel for you. And I don't regret or feel ashamed of anything about that. And," he added ruefully. "I'm not quite through puberty yet, in case you haven't noticed."

"Well," she said slyly, and she leaned forward to brush the side of his neck with her lips. "I didn't get enough time to make an accurate assessment..."

"I still think we should wait to have sex," Harry told her once he could speak again. "I don't think your body is quite ready for that, no matter how much we are."

She turned his head so she could look him straight in the eye. Her lips were twitching, though she looked faintly exasperated. "Harry, are you really that naïve?"

"What?" Harry said blankly.

"I want you to think back," she murmured in his ear. "Remember when we first started dating? Your sixth year, my fifth?"

"Of course I remember," Harry said.

"All those secluded areas of Hogwarts that we discovered together," she continued. He licked his lips. He remembered it vividly, because it had been one of the happiest times of his life. Those hours that felt like they had been part of someone else's life, and he could forget everything about Voldemort, and the Horcruxes...

“We weren’t having sex then, either,” she told him. “Let me know when you figure it out.”

Ginny was right. They hadn’t had sex for the first time until one bright day at Grimmauld Place. But during his sixth year, they’d explored far more than the private areas of Hogwarts... he’d put his invisibility cloak to a use that he did not think Dumbledore suspected, because they’d been naked half the time—

“Oh!”

“Finally there, are you?” Ginny laughed.

Harry laughed with her, and then he pulled her down onto the soft carpet next to him, and kissed her.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

“You’re looking especially happy, Harry,” Sirius said. It was the first Saturday in March, and they were finally on their way to destroying another Horcrux. “Wish I could be. I hate that place, I really do.”

Harry flushed and forced himself not to look at Ginny. They’d used the extra hour they had between the time when the twins and Percy were occupied and they had to meet everyone here to spend time along. The twins were in a well-deserved detention with Remus, and Percy was being given the grand tour of the Ministry for Magic, at Dumbledore’s recommendation.

Ron, behind him, gagged. “Don’t ask him why he’s happy, Sirius. Just don’t.”

Sirius looked bewildered. “I assumed it was because we’re about to destroy a Horcrux...”

“That’s exactly it,” Harry said hastily. They were alone for the moment, but Snape and Dumbledore would probably show up at any time. “I’m absolutely thrilled that we’re finally going to get rid of the damn thing.” And he was, but it wasn’t the reason why he was happy.

"You're lying," Sirius said. "What's going on? Did you figure out how we're going to get Rookwood out of Azkaban?"

"No," Harry muttered.

Ginny snorted. "He's just as naïve as you were, Harry. Like godfather, like godson."

"Harry isn't spending hours in the shower anymore," Ron told Sirius. "Don't ask any more questions."

Harry gaped at him. "I can't believe you're monitoring how much time I spend in the shower."

"I'm not!" Ron insisted. "Seamus and Dean mentioned it a few times. And believe me, I wish I didn't know how to add two and two together."

"I wasn't certain that you *did* know basic maths, Weasley," Snape swept into the room, followed closely by Dumbledore. "I'm relieved to find that I was mistaken."

"Don't listen to him, Ron," Sirius said. "I know he cheated when he drew lots with Moony to see which one of them occupied the twins today. And you don't have to listen to cheaters."

"I did not—"

"Yes, you did," Sirius said cheerfully. "Moony put a charm on his to win, and the only way you could've beaten him is if you did too."

Snape's mouth twitched. "Then it wasn't really cheating, was it? I was merely evening out the playing field."

"I suggest we continue this discussion after we destroy the Horcrux," Dumbledore said, though his eyes were twinkling. He strode over to the glass case in which the Sword of Gryffindor was kept. "Sirius, you've spoken to Kreacher and told him that we're coming today, correct? And he's taken down his enchantments?"

Sirius nodded. "I think the elf has been looking forward to this for weeks, ever since I explained to him that I had to finish Regulus' job."

Harry, Ron, and Ginny beamed. "It'll be so nice to see him again," Ginny said.

"Yeah, Kreacher is great," Ron said.

"We wouldn't be here without him," Harry added.

Sirius held up his hands. "Whoa. There is absolutely no need for the heaping of praise anymore. I admit that I was reluctant... but I did realize that what you said was true. He was what he was because of my mother and father."

Harry felt relieved. He was thankful for all that Kreacher had done in the future, but it got a bit wearing to constantly talk about him in front of Sirius.

"Good," Ron said. "I was getting tired of it."

Sirius stepped into the Floo first, and shouted "Grimmauld Place!" Within two minutes, all were blinking in the darkness of the basement kitchen. Harry grinned; Ginny had soot all over her. He patted her down. Ron pointedly looked the opposite direction.

"Master Sirius! Master Sirius!" Kreacher's frog-like croak. He came running into the kitchen, and Harry noticed that the elf was being well-treated. He looked as he had after Harry had given him the fake locket – clean and happy.

"Kreacher," Sirius said. "I'd like to introduce you to some friends of mine. I've already told you about them, but here they are. Harry Potter, my godson, Ron and Ginny Weasley, Severus Snape, and Albus Dumbledore. I would really appreciate it if you treated them with respect."

"Of course, Master, of course!" Kreacher said. "Are they going to... destroy the locket?"

“Yes,” Sirius said. “And remember what I said about punishing yourself when you hear that word – Kreacher! Did you...”

Harry turned his attention to the table for the first time, and saw that Kreacher had prepared a veritable feast for them. His mouth watered, and Ron’s stomach rumbled loudly enough that it sounded like a small lion.

“Kreacher thought Master’s guests would be hungry,” Kreacher croaked.

“Let’s get rid of the damn locket,” Ron said. “I’m starving.”

“Kreacher placed it in the room with the tapestry,” Kreacher said. Then he paused. “Can Kreacher watch?”

“Of course,” Sirius said. Harry was happy to see that he looked at the elf with genuine fondness. Whatever resentment he had felt – and which had eventually led to his own death last time – was completely gone.

And so, Harry noticed with great surprise, was the portrait of Mrs. Black. “Where’d your mother go?”

“I told Kreacher that he could put her in his new den – I’ve given him a large closet, he wouldn’t take an actual room,” Sirius said. “That got her right off the wall, even with the Permanent Sticking Charm.”

Kreacher had placed Slytherin’s locket in a prominent position on a footstool. All the furniture had been cleared away from it, as though the elf had not known how much space would be needed. It was a little dramatic, but it felt right. Once this was destroyed, they would be that much closer to Voldemort’s defeat.

“Harry?” Dumbledore held out the sword to him.

But Harry shook his head. He remembered how the Horcrux had used Ron’s own insecurities against him, and he did not want to face what Voldemort would see in his heart. “No,” he said. “I think someone else should destroy this.”

“Not me,” Ron said firmly.

“I will,” Ginny stepped forward and took the sword from Dumbledore’s grasp. “I’ve always wanted to destroy a Horcrux.”

Harry wanted to say something, to talk her out of it. He exchanged uncertain glances with Ron, who obviously felt the same way. He did not want her hurt. The wounds that it had left on Ron were easily healed. Harry had been able to tell his friend that he only thought of Hermione as a sister, and she felt the same way about him. But Ginny... she would probably see the same thing that Harry would’ve, and there were no reassurances forthcoming from the Weasleys.

But then he looked at the way her jaw was set, and he realized that he would create a whole new insecurity for her if he told her not to do this.

“All right,” Harry said. He moved to stand behind the Horcrux. “Try not to hit me, too.”

She grinned.

“Open,” he said in Parseltongue. It sprang open, revealing dark brown eyes – they were not red, but they were cold and hungry for power.

Ginny stared at it, holding the sword up. Harry repressed the urge to tell her to do it.

“I have seen your heart, Ginevra Weasley, and it is mine.”

Do it, do it, do it, Harry chanted, but he didn’t say it out loud.

“No, it isn’t,” Ginny said quietly. “And I’m Ginny Potter, you arse.”

Then she swung with all her might, and cleaved the Horcrux and the footstool in two. Harry heard a distant scream, and kicked the broken wood and metal aside, and pulled her into his arms. The sword dropped with a clatter.

“I am,” Harry whispered for her and her alone, “so in love with you.”

Chapter 17 – Dementors

“Mr. Potter!”

McGonagall's icy, annoyed voice cut straight through Harry's thoughts and brought him back to third year Transfiguration. He started, all thoughts of Pettigrew and the fact that he had not yet escaped flying out of his mind, and stared up at her guiltily. Judging by the way her lips had thinned to the point that they looked as though they had been drawn on by an especially fine quill this was not the first time she had attempted to get his attention. “Yes, Professor?”

“Perhaps you would like to answer the question?” she said. “If it isn't too much to ask that you focus your attention on my class?”

Harry gritted his teeth. He had no idea what the question was. He looked around the classroom, trying to find clues. He caught Neville's eye, but he seemed just as mystified. And Hermione was sitting with Ron today, so she could not help either. Each student sat with a rather ordinary looking wooden box on the desk in front of him. “Er, sorry, Professor, could you repeat the question?”

“Why is it that, when you have transfigured the wooden box into a loaf of bread, you will not be able to eat it and gain sustenance from it?” she asked icily.

“Oh,” Harry said, relieved. “That's because it defies Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration. Wizards and witches can't make food out of nothing.” He'd learned that the hard way during their year on the run, living in a tent and having to eat mushrooms most of the time.

“And would you care to have guess as to why this is so?” she pressed.

Harry thought about it. It was something that he had not done at the time when Hermione had told them about Gamp's infernal Law. He had accepted it as truth (as he did most things that Hermione said) and moved on. So why wasn't it? An image of Peter Pettigrew as Scabbers flitted across his thoughts. “I reckon it's because... take an

animagus, for example. They don't actually become the animal, they just look like it. That's why animagi can change back and forth – if they were too much like their animal, they'd never change back. So... when we transfigure something, we're still just changing what it looks like. We can use it, and it's relatively permanent. But the loaf of bread we make today will remember that it's still just a box."

"That was well reasoned, Mr. Potter," she said stiffly. "Five points to Gryffindor."

Harry was a little surprised by this. Ever since the (mostly) disastrous Christmas holidays, she had been very cool toward Harry. All the teachers had been except Hagrid. Harry was not sure that Hagrid even knew what had happened – he had not said anything about it, and last week he had seen Harry and Ron speaking to each other behind his hut, and he had not attempted to force them apart.

Harry and Ron had been discussing Pettigrew and his escape from Azkaban prison. The whole school – indeed, the entire Wizarding world – could speak of little else. No one had escaped the dementors before. Everyone had thought that Azkaban was one of the safest places to keep prisoners, and the terror was palpable. Harry had been relieved when the news broke – it had happened in April, well over a year after Snape had Confunded him.

For a few weeks, Harry had been certain that the plan was working. Not flawlessly of course – he firmly pushed away images of the Weasleys – but enough so that he felt reasonably confident that Wormtail would find his master. And then Wormtail was sighted in Aberholloway, a small town with a large population of wizards. It was only one hundred and fifty kilometers away from Hogwarts...

The Ministry was entirely useless, of course. Worse than useless. Harry thought that the fear caused by Wormtail's escape had addled their small brains. They had sent the dementors after Pettigrew, and the dementors had searched Aberholloway thoroughly. One man had been mistaken for Wormtail, and had been given the Kiss before the Aurors could even blink. Not that the Ministry had reported that blunder; Sirius, who had been watching as Dumbledore had told him to, had witnessed it.

Harry had hoped that it was an aberration, that Wormtail had been confused when he first escaped. But he had been seen again by a squib just the other day in another small village... one that was less than seventy kilometers away from Hogwarts. Harry feared that something had gone badly wrong.

So did Dumbledore, who had dispatched both Sirius and Remus to attempt to find Pettigrew and bring him back to Hogwarts where they could renew the Confundus Charm and send him to Voldemort.

“Mr. Potter! What is it that is so much more important than Transfiguration? May I remind you that the exams are swiftly approaching?”

Harry looked around again. Everyone had their wands out and were attempting, with various degrees of success, to transfigure their boxes into loaves of bread. “Peter Pettigrew,” he finally answered honestly.

The entire class stilled. Neville gave him a swift look out of the corner of his eye, and stopped muttering and tapping his wand against his half box half loaf.

“I understand that you must be quite upset,” she said almost gently. “But the Ministry is making every effort to capture him. You mustn’t think that he will be free for much longer.”

He felt mildly disoriented by the fact that she, who had been tortured into insanity in the future, was bidding him not to be concerned by the fact that Wormtail, whom he hoped would not be recaptured by the dementors, had escaped. He blinked away the confusion. “Yeah,” he said after a few moments. “I suppose you’re right.”

He gave all of his attention to transfiguring the box in front of him for the rest of the class. It was difficult, even though he had been putting greater effort into Transfiguration this year, both in the classroom and in the Room of Requirement. He, Neville, Hermione, and Luna had spent just last night attempting to learn the extremely difficult human transfiguration. Future knowledge did not help as much when it was not Defense spells, and he was trying his best right along with them.

Ron and Ginny had reported similar difficulties when they met with the others instead of Harry.

Harry walked out of the class, five steps behind Ron. They both loitered around the door, waiting for Hermione to finish her other class. There was much jostling out in the corridor as everyone else slowly filed out. They were all whispering about Wormtail; all were quite relieved that Professor McGonagall had reassured them that the Ministry was doing everything it could.

"She's right, you know," Lavender Brown whispered to Seamus Finnigan. "The Ministry isn't going to just let him go free."

"Me mam says it's only a matter of time before he's caught," Seamus said confidently. "No one escapes from the dementors."

Ron snorted loudly. "Sorry," he laughed. "But Pettigrew already *did* escape from Azkaban. He's probably running around as a rat, and they can't even tell."

Harry tried to hide his smile, but couldn't quite manage it.

"Weasley! Potter!" Professor McGonagall swept out of the room, carrying a large stack of books. "What are you two doing?"

"Waiting for Hermione," they both said at once.

"Weasley, leave," she said. "Do I need to remind you of the conditions your mother gave us?"

"It's my day for Hermione!" Ron said indignantly.

She looked weary. "Fine, then. Potter, get to your next class."

Harry obeyed with alacrity, though he wondered what Professor McGonagall made of the fact that he, Ron, and Ginny shared their friends. She had to have noticed that Hermione spent three days of the week sitting with Ron, and two with Harry. Neville spent three days with Harry and two with Ron. But she hadn't said anything to either of them, and Harry hoped that Mrs. Weasley did not know

about this. What if she told Ron to stop seeing Hermione and Neville as well?

His thoughts carried him all the way to Professor Octavius' classroom. He grimaced. He'd spent the last several days working on the vicious homework assignment the professor had given them, but he still felt as though it would not receive the best marks. He'd been alternating receiving an Acceptable and Exceeds Expectations, but as they were set to translate more difficult runes, he felt himself slipping.

Harry put his things beside his seat, pulled out his long translation scroll, and hurriedly made a few corrections. Daphne Greengrass joined him after a moment.

"What'd you get for 'psehav'?" she asked quietly.

Before Harry could tell her, Professor Octavius strode in and Summoned their scrolls.

"Congratulations," he said. "You have completed the course of study for your third year. As the exams are coming up in a few weeks, I will expect you to learn more runes. However, as I fully believe that revision should be done on your own time, I have decided to give you a small preview of what you will be studying next year."

Hermione looked excited. Her face gleamed; Harry could see it from all the way across the classroom. Everyone else, who did not have her seemingly effortless skill, looked as weary as Harry felt. He found himself thinking, not for the first time, that perhaps he should have taken Divination again after all. Ancient Runes was a challenge that he had not expected.

"Ah," Professor Octavius said. "I see that you – excepting Miss Granger – are as challenged by this class as all the other third years who came before you. It is as I expected, although I can promise – as you will see in a few moments – that it will get even more difficult before it gets easier. Anyone care to hazard a guess as to why?"

Hermione immediately raised her hand, nearly knocking Ron in the head as she did so. "Professor, is it because we haven't yet learned the higher runes?"

He nodded, and permitted a small smile. "Indeed, Miss Granger. You have been working simple concepts. The names of animals, for one. Various names for inanimate objects you might find in a house or around a school. The difficulty you have faced in learning these are not merely because it is always a challenge to learn a foreign language. As I told you the first day, your own magic is being challenged as much as your brains."

Harry knew that was true. Whenever he finished his homework he felt exhausted, and he had to really push himself to practice the Charms and Transfiguration required by Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall. He knew now that Hermione's exhaustion last time (and this time) was not just caused by the fact that she was traveling back in time to attend more classes than any other student.

"Today," Professor Octavius continued. "I am going to show you the runes that match the higher concepts. Some of them you will study next year; some of them will wait until fifth, sixth, or seventh years."

Then why does he want us to see them now? Harry thought, confused.

"Why are we seeing them now, then?" Ron asked.

Professor Octavius paused. "As I have already said, Ancient Runes is a difficult class. I trust you lot believe me now. Some find, in their fourth year, or their fifth, that it is simply too much. I believe that it won't be too much for any of you, but if it is, I suggest you seek out your Head of House and ask to be placed in a different class."

There was a rather sober silence. Switching to a different class was not something that many students wished to do. Harry and Ron had stuck with Divination because they could not bring themselves to leave and join another class when they'd be an entire year behind. He eyed the velvety case that had just appeared on Professor Octavius' desk.

"Come and choose," Professor Octavius ordered. "Quietly. You're to study them for the next hour. I would also like you to draw what you see. If you feel like you can define it – and no, I'm not expecting it –

please give your reasons for doing so. Take your time; there will be no unsatisfactory marks given for this assignment.”

Harry lined up behind Hannah Abbott.

He grabbed the first rune he touched, and took it back to his seat. He took out a piece of parchment and stared at the small slab of silver, upon which was etched a very complex rune. How was he supposed to define it? Daphne Greengrass looked just as mystified, and more than a little annoyed. He glanced over at Ron’s and Hermione’s side of the classroom; Hermione was already drawing feverishly. Ron just stared blankly.

What am I supposed to be seeing? He asked himself. Then, thinking that he might have it upside down, he turned it around. It still didn’t bring anything to mind, so he shrugged and began to draw it.

As he drew, he began thinking of Wormtail again. *Where was he? Why is he apparently on his way to Hogwarts?* For the first time in a while, Harry fully appreciated the fact that he had played a part in releasing Wormtail to the world once more: The man who had betrayed Harry’s parents to Voldemort and set his destiny in motion. He felt a little burst of pain at the thought; his parents whom he had always, always loved, and yet had never known.

And Wormtail was also responsible for Sirius’ false imprisonment. Sirius, who had trusted Harry without question, and was still haunted by what the dementors had done to him. He’d spent an extra year and a half being tormented because of Harry...

Harry stared at the rune again once he realized that he’d stopped drawing. It seemed to shimmer a little, and Harry blinked. He still had no idea what it meant, but he could figure it out once he completed the assigned task. He glanced over at Ron again, his quill hovering over the parchment. He missed being able to speak with him openly, and though they found time in the Room of Requirement, they were missing out on the more relaxed times. The twins and Percy were always with him and Ginny during mealtimes and in the common room...

And Ginny. He paid little attention to what his quill was doing as she popped into his thoughts. These past few months had been painful – the small amount of time they were able to meet was just not enough. Never enough.

Because of the Weasleys. His stomach clenched. He had Sirius and Remus, and that was a very bright thing. But he missed Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and the way it had been; sometimes it felt like a physical ache. He understood their point of view; he really did. But that somehow made it hurt even more. He thought about *always and always*, and the fact that Harry had burned bridges so badly with the Weasleys that he might as well have used Fiendfyre.

Harry wiped the sweat off his brow. He looked down at his parchment and felt a jolt of shock. The rune he had drawn somewhat blindly... he did not recognize all of it, but he saw with perfect clarity a shape that was very familiar indeed. He saw it in the mirror everyday. And there it was plain as day, the exact size and shape of his lightning scar, drawn in his own hand.

Suddenly, he knew exactly what this rune meant, and why he had been so distracted while he had drawn it, and what he had been distracted with. *This rune means pain*, he wrote quickly. *Emotional and physical pain*. He left it at that.

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“Can’t you take that thing off?” Hermione said peevishly. “No one’s around. It’s *weird* to talk to you when you’re just a disembodied voice.”

Harry reluctantly pulled off his invisibility cloak. She was right; she, Harry, and Neville sat beside the lake on a sunny, summer afternoon quizzing each other on Charms. Everyone else was inside the castle, it seemed. But still, Harry had gotten into the habit of wearing it pretty much wherever he was, and he felt slightly naked without it.

“Happy now?” he asked sourly.

“Yes,” she replied primly.

"It's a good thing he usually wears it," Neville said. He lay on his back, and held up a thick stack of parchment – Hermione's notes for the entire year – to block the sun. "You saw what the Weasley twins did to him yesterday."

"I didn't, actually," Hermione said distractedly. "But I heard. Harry, you really ought to have told a professor."

"Why?" Harry asked, very uncomfortable with the turn the conversation had taken. He did not want to talk with Hermione and Neville about the Weasleys. They had, thus far, been able to avoid it since the other two had reinforced their friendship with him. "It was just the Jelly-Legs Jinx. And I don't care."

Hermione opened her mouth to say something, but seemed to think better of it.

"Ron was furious," Neville said. "And so was Ginny. I think they're going to try to get them back somehow."

"I wish we could meet all together in the Room of Requirement again," Hermione said quietly. "It doesn't feel right. Either we're missing you, or we're missing them."

"Yeah," Harry agreed. It felt very cold all of a sudden, and not as pleasant.

"Harry," Neville said. Something in the tone of his voice made Harry look up. Neville looked very serious all of a sudden, and Harry had the feeling that something had been weighing on his mind for a while. "Is the secret that you and Ginny are... you know, in love?"

Damn it, Neville! Not in front of Hermione! Harry wanted to shout. Not that he did not want to tell her, but this wasn't the right time. They were too young still. And something told him that Hermione Granger would not be as patient and willing to wait as Neville Longbottom.

"What secret?" Hermione asked immediately. Harry felt the weight of her stare.

“Harry and Ron and Ginny aren’t telling us something,” Neville told her. Harry resisted the urge to silence him; Hermione would find that extremely suspicious, and any hope he would have of getting out of this without telling them everything would be gone. *Not that I know how I’m going to deflect this.*

“What do you mean?”

“Neville...” Harry said quietly.

Neville ignored him. “I’ve thought it since last year. You know, when Harry saved Ginny from that basilisk. I thought it might be about You-Know-Who for the longest time. I asked Harry about it, but he wouldn’t tell me what it was. But after Christmas... I started to think maybe it wasn’t.”

“Harry?” Hermione said sharply.

But Harry could not gather his scattered thoughts, and it seemed as though he was watching himself from a great distance. Now was not the time for this, and this was not the place.

“Harry said that he would tell me what it was,” Neville continued relentlessly. “But that I wasn’t old enough. And then when we – uh – heard about what happened with him and Ginny, I thought that might be it.”

“Why would he tell you that you were too young?” They were now speaking about him as though he wasn’t there. “You’re a day older than he is!”

“I dunno,” Neville said uncertainly.

“I think you’re right, Neville,” Hermione said. She had a vague, unfocused look on her face. “I’ve thought it a bit odd, all along... ever since Christmas, anyway. Ginny told me that it wasn’t, you know, as bad as the twins and Percy obviously think it is. But why is Ron being so understanding?”

Neville shrugged. "He still likes Harry. And they still spend time all together," Neville looked at Harry furtively. "I saw them all come out of the Room of Requirement together a few weeks ago."

Hermione's eyebrows slammed together. "But Ron was going on yesterday about how stupid it was that he couldn't see Harry!"

Harry definitely felt chilled now, though he knew it wasn't due to the weather. "Listen—"

"So is it because you and Ginny are together?" Neville asked him. "And Ron knows?"

"Yes," Harry lied desperately.

"He's lying!" Hermione said incredulously. "That's not it, Neville. That isn't even a secret anymore; the whole school knows what happened over the Christmas holidays."

The entire sky seemed to darken at her words, and Harry eyed her nervously, before realizing that Hermione, powerful though she was, could not cause the sun to dim. He looked up and saw a bank of black, angry clouds rolling slowly toward Hogwarts. The temperature dropped another few degrees.

"Harry," Hermione said in a low voice. "What is going on?"

Harry stared at her helplessly. She looked quite confused and more than a little angry. If he did not tell her, if he lied to her, something would break between them. Harry did not know if she would be able to trust him any longer. He opened his mouth, resigned. "Ron and Ginny—"

But he was interrupted by the arrival of Ron's Patronus. It landed practically in Harry's lap. "PETTIGREW AT HOGWARTS! WHOMPING WILLOW! DEMENTORS!" it yelled with Ron's voice, and faded away almost immediately.

"Was that *Ron*?" Neville said.

Harry looked up at the sky. He should have *known* that the darkness and the cold were not natural – how many times had he been in a dementor-infested area? “Get back to the school,” he ordered them. He’d stood up, and now he looked down on them both. “Get back to the school right now.”

He did not wait for their response, but spun around and, leaving his invisibility cloak, sprinted toward the Whomping Willow. *Was Pettigrew a rat or a man?* Neither option was very good: a rat would be difficult for him to spot, and a man was vulnerable to the Kiss. *Why did he come back to Hogwarts?* Snape suspected that the Confundus Charm had worn partially away, but if that was true, then why was he here? Was he going to try to kill Harry?

“HARRY!” Hermione shouted. He looked back and with a plunging feeling in his stomach, he saw that both Hermione and Neville were racing after him. “WHAT – ARE – YOU – DOING?!”

“GET BACK TO THE CASTLE!” Harry bellowed, but neither showed any intention of doing so.

“Ron – said,” Neville panted. Harry could barely understand him. “He – said – Pettigrew – and – dementors!”

Harry wished that he had the Marauder’s Map with him, although he knew that Ron’s warning had come because he had been watching it. If Pettigrew was transformed, then it would be almost impossible to find him before it was too late. “He’s an escaped criminal!” Harry shouted behind him. Unbelievably, they were catching up. But Harry’s limbs felt tight and sluggish... the dementors were getting close.

“We aren’t going to leave you behind!” Hermione yelled. “If you want us back at the castle so bad, come with us!”

Harry shook his head. And icy breeze blasted his face, they were almost there. He stopped. “Stay behind me,” he said softly. “Hermione... do you know the spell to reveal an animagus?”

She nodded.

"If you hear anything, anything at all," Harry continued. "A scuffle... anything. Say it. Neville," he said in a louder voice. "You're going to have to do the Patronus Charm. You too, Hermione."

"But I can't!" Neville said in a fearful voice. "You've seen me – I only make mist!"

Harry reached over and shook him. Hard. "Damn it, Neville. Do you feel the cold? That's the dementors who've been chasing Pettigrew. You're going to *have* to do it."

"But I—"

"Shut up. Think of a happy memory. You can't *afford* not to be able to do it."

They stood in a very small triangle. Harry could feel both of them trembling, and he fought the urge to tell them again to leave. It was almost too late anyway, he thought as he saw the puffs of his breath in the suddenly frigid air.

There was a slight movement to their left. Hermione squeaked, "*Animarevelio*" before Harry had to remind her. Nothing happened; Pettigrew did not suddenly appear. "False alarm," Harry murmured. "Probably just one of Hagrid's creatures."

And suddenly it was not a false alarm. The grass rustled off to their right, and Harry could hear frightened squeaking. His arm trembled, whether it was from nerves or cold, he did not know. "*Animarevelio*," Hermione said again, and Pettigrew spun into his true form, less than twenty meters away from them. He was whimpering and trembling. He sat down on the ground and appeared to be unable to move anymore.

The dementors were right behind him. There were so many of them that Harry felt a ripple of true fear. "*Incarcerous!*" Harry yelled, and Pettigrew was bound. "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*"

His father's stag burst out of his wand and charged the dementors. They fell back, but there were more and more coming. Harry's arm trembled with the effort. "DO IT, NEVILLE, HERMIONE!"

He ran forward, trying to reach Pettigrew before he could be given the Kiss – that would ruin everything, everything. His stag kept charging, but it grew weaker and weaker as it met with more and more. *Don't fail me, don't fail me!*

“*Ex-expecto Patronum!*” he heard Hermione shout, but she sounded too afraid. She'd never been very good at this particular Charm; it was the only spell she truly struggled with. “HERMIONE!” he bellowed, hoping she would take strength from it.

He was halfway to Pettigrew when ten – no, more than twenty – broke off from the rest and headed toward Neville and Hermione. Neville and Hermione, who had not yet produced a corporeal Patronus. He looked at Pettigrew, huddled on the ground, screaming. It was an easy decision. Harry halted, spun around, and sprinted back to his friends. *Always and always*. He could not protect them all, and Neville and Hermione came first. Distant shouts – the professors or Ron, he did not know – came from the direction of the castle.

His stag followed him, and with a burst of energy, attacked. “DO IT! DO IT!” Harry shouted at Neville and Hermione. He did not spare a glance back at Wormtail; he had no desire to watch the man Kissed, despite the fact that he had wrought so much evil.

Yet as he watched his stag charging dementor after dementor, he saw a flash of brilliant light – another Patronus – out of the corner of his eye. He did not turn around, but stood as close to his friends as he could. They kept trying the Charm, but neither one of them had succeeded in making more than mist. *Please be Dumbledore*, he thought. *Or Snape*.

Pettigrew screamed again; it was abruptly cut off. Harry spared a glance and saw him – saw him running away. Another Patronus – he could not tell what it was, only that it was not Dumbledore's phoenix, Ron's dog, Snape's and Ginny's does – held off the dementors as he scrambled away, jerking forward and stumbling, back the way he had come.

Harry was weakening quickly. Neville and Hermione were now huddled on the ground at his feet, and his stag seemed to move in slow motion. The dementors kept coming and coming, but Harry

grimly held his ground. *Not Neville and Hermione, not Neville and Hermione, not Neville and Hermione.* He could hear screaming, and a chill that gripped his heart, and knew that he was failing...

A flare of silver light erupted before his eyes. Dumbledore's phoenix spun and swirled in a brilliant dance. More Patronuses joined Dumbledore's. At that same moment, Harry's stag faded away. Harry fell atop Hermione and Neville, too exhausted to move, too drained to call up his stag again. He closed his eyes.

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Voices woke him.

"Never seen anything like it!" McGonagall's voice.

"It's fortunate that Dumbledore happened to see what was going on," Professor Flitwick squeaked.

"They could have been Kissed!"

"What's the Ministry's take on this?" Remus asked.

"They're taking the dementors elsewhere," McGonagall said. "All that, and they couldn't even catch Pettigrew!"

"Evil bastard," Sirius muttered. "So he's completely gone, is he? No trace?"

"Not yet," Flitwick said. There was a brief silence, then, "it's lucky Potter knew the Patronus Charm. I wonder where he learned it?"

"I taught him," Remus lied smoothly. And it wasn't really a lie, Harry thought. "His boggart was a dementor—"

"A dementor?" McGonagall said. "I would've expected it to be You-Know-Who."

"Doesn't matter," Sirius said. "I don't even like to think about what might have happened if he hadn't known how to do it. He would've been Kissed, and his two friends as well."

So Hermione and Neville were all right. Harry felt a warm feeling of relief that helped dispel the chill that had lodged in his bones. He opened his mouth to say so—

And a large slab of chocolate was shoved in. Harry chewed, and felt warmth that spread from his toes to the tips of his fingers. “You’re going to eat this entire bar of chocolate before you even try to talk,” Remus said firmly. “Your friends are all right – you held off the dementors very well. I’m quite proud that you managed a corporeal Patronus, Harry.”

Harry kept eating. He opened his eyes, and saw that he was in the Hospital Wing, of course. Hermione and Neville lay on the beds beside him. Ron sat beside Hermione’s bed, looking pale and scared out of his wits. Ginny, next to Neville, stared at Harry. He could hardly take his eyes off of her.

“Do you think the Weasleys should leave now that he’s awake?” Flitwick squeaked. Harry finally looked away from her.

“No,” Remus said firmly. “None of them are alone together, and Ron and Ginny ought to be allowed to be here when their friends wake up.”

“What happened?” Harry said when he’d finally finished his chocolate.

“We were hoping you could tell us that, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall said firmly.

“We were studying outside,” Harry said quickly, “for our Charms test. And we decided to come back – it was getting cold—”

“Because of the dementors,” Sirius said. “They do that.”

Hermione stirred. Harry looked over at her, and saw that her eyes were wide. She knew that he was obviously not telling the truth. Ron bent over and whispered something in her ear. A few moments passed and she nodded.

“Hermione’s awake,” Ron said loudly. “She’ll need some chocolate, too.” Madam Pomfrey immediately bustled over to her side, and set a huge plate piled with chocolate shavings on the stand next to her.

“You’re to eat all of that,” Madam Pomfrey told Hermione sternly. “No buts.”

“You were saying, Mr. Potter?” McGonagall raised her eyebrow.

“Then we saw Pettigrew,” Harry said. “And the dementors came right after him. After that, I couldn’t really tell you. I used the Patronus Charm, and after that it’s a bit of a blur, to be honest.”

He stared at Sirius while he said this, hoping his godfather would know that this was not the entire story. He appeared to understand, for he gave a slight nod. Harry wondered what the other professors made of Sirius’ appearance. This was the first time they had seen him since he came out of Azkaban, after all.

“May I have some time with my godson?” Sirius asked, as though reading Harry’s mind. “I never intended on meeting him in a Hospital Wing for the first time since he was one year old.” Harry almost snorted; Sirius had probably never intended on meeting Harry when Harry was dead drunk and shouting at Voldemort at the top of his lungs either.

McGonagall looked at Ron and Ginny, who did not look back at her. “I cannot, in good conscience, leave them alone. Molly Weasley—”

“I’ll stay,” Remus said quietly. “And Madam Pomfrey will be here. Hermione and Neville went through quite an ordeal today; I’m sure that they need the comfort of their friends.”

But even when Flitwick and McGonagall left, he could not speak plainly. Hermione was making good progress on her pile of chocolate, but she stared at Harry like a hawk, despite Ron’s best efforts to distract her. And Madam Pomfrey refused to leave her charges, especially when Neville woke up about a half and hour later. Harry could only exchange significant glances, letting them know that he had a bit more to tell them. Not much, just that he suspected

Pettigrew had a wand. Wormtail had to have been the one to cast that Patronus.

Ron and Ginny finally left when Madam Pomfrey shooed them away to go eat their dinner in the Great Hall. Remus and Sirius left soon after, probably to meet with Dumbledore and Snape, who had been absent from the Hospital Wing all afternoon. Harry suspected that they were looking for Pettigrew.

And then he was alone with Neville and Hermione, with only Madam Pomfrey as a reason not to pick up the conversation they had been having earlier. Harry avoided their gazes, and forced himself to eat more chocolate. The lights grew dim, and Madam Pomfrey retired to her office. Harry felt like leaping from the bed and escaping, but his legs were still rather shaky, so he did not.

“Harry,” Hermione said.

Harry started. “Er – yeah?”

“Thank you,” she said. Harry looked over at her. She looked very serious, despite the fact that she was wearing a nightgown and had chocolate all over her mouth. “I expect I’ll be practicing the Patronus Charm a bit more.”

“Me too,” Neville said fervently.

Harry lay awake for a long while into the early hours of the morning. *Where is Pettigrew now?* He thought. He hoped that he was now on his way to Voldemort, but he could not be sure. Dumbledore had poked his head in sometime after Madam Pomfrey finally went to bed. When Harry stared at him, hoping for answers, he only shook his head. So he and Snape had not found Pettigrew; he only hoped that the Ministry hadn’t either.

He also wondered when Neville and Hermione would ask for answers again. He knew that they would; they may be grateful that he had saved their lives – and their souls – but he knew Hermione well enough that she would corner him (and probably Ron and Ginny) soon enough.

He left the Hospital Wing before they woke up the next morning. He felt a bit like a coward, but he couldn't tell them just yet. Not until he'd spoken to the other two.

He was not watching where he was going, and thus almost knocked Ginny over. He caught her, and she threw herself in his arms. "I was so scared!" she whispered fiercely. "Ron told me what was happening – but the twins were being their annoying selves and we couldn't leave the common room!"

"It's all right," he murmured. "We're all right."

"Pettigrew?" she asked after she finally let go of him.

He shook his head. "No idea. I have no idea what –"

And Percy rounded the corner. He stopped dead when he saw Harry and Ginny together, and Harry was desperately glad that he had not seen them hugging as if they would never let go. There was a long moment of silence, and Harry wondered if he was about to be hexed. Then Percy walked toward them; Harry stepped back.

"The twins are coming," Percy said to Ginny. "Better not let them see you with him."

Then he walked on, not sparing either of them a glance. Harry gaped after him, unable to believe that Percy Weasley had just warned them, and had not said anything to Harry at all. He racked his brain, trying to figure out what this meant.

Ginny looked just as stunned as he felt. "We have to talk," she said in a low voice. "I'll get Ron – meet us in the Room of Requirement tonight. Wait for us. We'll be there."

Harry nodded. They had plenty to talk about: Pettigrew, Hermione, Neville, Percy... so many complications that they could not have foreseen.

Harry found himself, a little while later, wandering back to where he had left his invisibility cloak. It had been quite stupid of him to run off

without it, and he'd felt uneasy since yesterday. He did not feel right without it, even when he was not wearing it.

His gaze swept the patch of grass where they had been sitting four times before it really registered that the shimmering cloak was not where he had left it. He spent the next hour searching frantically in wider and wider circles, despite the fact that he was certain where he, Neville, and Hermione had been sitting just a day ago.

He finally had to give up. He sat down at the edge of the lake, and pulled his legs up to his chest. The fact that someone had stolen his cloak disturbed him a great deal. But what filled his stomach with icy dread was the thought of Ron's and Ginny's reactions. He had not told Ron and Ginny that the Resurrection Stone had been destroyed two years ago. He had not wanted them to know; did not want them to know until... but they could not fail to notice that his cloak was gone.

And Harry wondered how on earth he was going to tell them that he was going to die.

Author's Note:

And book three is done! I'm quite happy about this, as I'm sure you can imagine. I actually took two days off before I even started writing this chapter, and I'm feeling a bit renewed. I can't quite believe that I've written over 100000 words in about three weeks. I'm very eager to get this story done – not because I don't like it, but because there are certain scenes that I desperately want to write (especially after writing this year), and they're a long while to wait.

I feel a bit bad about leaving third year with several unanswered questions. Well... actually, not all that bad. It's kind of enjoyable. Some questions will be answered in year four, I promise.

I hope you will continue to enjoy the story. Oh! And I'm quite excited by the fact that I got my first (for this story) flame! I'm not counting the fact that several of you were VERY angry with me about the Weasleys. Those are honest opinions and, frankly, I quite understand. But then the breaks, and the Weasley rift appears to be permanent... for now...

See you at the next update!

Chapter 18 – Malfoys and Blacks

“You’re sure that the Gaunt Shack is rebuilt exactly the way it was?” Harry asked Dumbledore. “And the enchantments are there as well?”

“Yes, Harry,” Dumbledore said. “When he goes to check it, he will have no idea that it is lost.”

“I don’t understand why this is so important,” Sirius said. “Why go to so much effort to ensure that Voldemort doesn’t know you’ve been attacking his Horcruxes?”

“Because,” Harry said, “when the time comes to destroy him, I don’t want him fighting desperately. Last time he unleashed Fiendfyre and killed almost every student in the castle because he thought that it would break us, stop us from fighting, and that we would give up if we knew exactly what lengths he was going to take to maintain his control.”

Sirius paled. “He unleashed Fiendfyre on students.” It wasn’t a question.

Harry nodded. It haunted him...

The Room of Requirement was packed with people, and even though it had adjusted itself to the crowd, there was barely standing room. Harry and a Ravenclaw seventh year named Nicholas Boot had just returned from looking for the tiara; Harry nearly fell down the stairs when he saw that the remaining members of the Order of the Phoenix waited for him. The other professors, who had been with Harry when Snape rather dramatically exited the school, followed him.

“What’s going on?” Fred Weasley asked.

“We’re fighting,” Harry said. “Voldemort knows I’m here – he knows that he hasn’t got much time left. You’ve got to hold them off; I’ve got to search the castle.”

“What’s the plan, Harry?” Arthur Weasley asked.

“Professor Flitwick has cast protections around Hogwarts,” Harry said. “But it won’t hold the Death Eaters for long. Patrol around the school – don’t take them in an open fight, not yet. Disillusion yourselves.”

“What about the younger students?” Hannah Longbottom asked. “My little sisters are here.” Neville put his arm around his wife.

“We’re going to ask those students who are of age if they want to fight,” Professor Flitwick said. “Those who are too young will make their way out of the secret entrance that leads to the Hogs Head Inn.”

Harry looked around the room. Oliver Wood, Angelina Johnson, Katie Bell, and Alicia Spinnet stood in a tight circle near the twins. They would do perfectly. “Any Quidditch players?” Harry said loudly. He’d been out of school for nearly four years, and didn’t know who played for what house. But the young faces that made up Dumbledore’s Army, which still flourished despite the fact that the original members had long since graduated, told him that there was a good chance more than a few of them were at home on a broomstick. Ten others, besides Harry’s old Quidditch team, separated themselves from the crowd.

“Listen,” Harry said. “I want you on brooms. You’re to attack them from above. Dodge their spells the way you dodge Bludgers. Disillusion yourselves and your broomsticks so they can’t see you.”

“We’ll do it, Harry,” Oliver said. His face was very pale. “It’s just another ugly team we’re playing against.”

Harry nodded. Suddenly he knew what to say. “This is it, everyone.”

“The big one,” Fred said.

“The one we’ve been waiting for,” George continued.

Oliver managed to laugh.

Harry pulled Fred and George aside once he saw that Oliver was barking orders; the younger ones listened raptly. “Listen, I don’t want you on the brooms. You know every secret passageway in and out of this school. Take some other students – and Neville, Hannah, and

any other original member of Dumbledore's Army you can find. Keep the Death Eaters from getting in that way."

"Does that include me as well?" Ginny asked.

"No," Harry said shortly. "I want you with me, Ron, and Hermione."

"So you can protect me?" She smiled, but it was a bit dangerous. He had to choose his words carefully if he ever wanted to find himself in her bed again.

"No," Harry said. He bent and whispered in her ear, "we're going to find another Horcrux tonight... I thought you might like to destroy it."

She grinned. "Good answer, Potter."

"Where are Ron and Hermione, by the way?" Harry stood on his tip-toes and searched the crowd for them. "Haven't seen them."

"They said something about a bathroom," Ginny said. "Think they're releasing some tension before the fighting starts?"

Harry opened his mouth to laugh, but his scar hurt so badly that he feared that it would cleave his head in two. He opened his eyes, and saw that he was standing in front of the gates that led to Hogwarts, murder in his heart. Rage gripped him. Potter had done the unthinkable, had found his Horcruxes. He must not be allowed to continue; he must be broken and defeated.

"Use Fiendfyre," he ordered his Death Eaters. "Aim for where the students sleep. Kill them all."

Bellatrix Lestrange laughed delightedly and lifted her wand before any of the others. Lord Voldemort looked at her approvingly. Of all his servants, she was the best; she never cowered from a task. She understood better than any of them that some things just needed to be done.

"NO!"

He watched as the beautiful, destructive flames made their way to Gryffindor Tower and Ravenclaw Tower. The fire is like me, Voldemort thought. It purifies us from the unworthy. The screams began.

"NO! NO!" Harry shouted. He was on the floor; Ginny held him down, her eyes wide with fright. "No... he... Fiendfyre..."

He struggled to his feet, pushing past his old Quidditch team and knocking over Fred and George Weasley. "HE'S ATTACKING THE STUDENTS IN THEIR BEDS!" But he knew, he knew that it was already too late...

"Are you all right, Harry?" Sirius asked, concerned.

Harry pulled himself away from the memory with effort, and was somewhat surprised to find that he was at Sirius' home in Godric's Hollow, and the summer between his third and fourth year was waning. He was not at Hogwarts, and Voldemort had not just slaughtered an entire generation.

"Where is he?" Harry smashed his hand down on the table. "Damn it. How could he vanish off the face of the earth?"

"He could quite easily," Dumbledore pointed out fairly. "He can turn into a rat. As to where he is, I have no idea. I must admit that I am hoping he is in Albania."

"I am too," Harry said. "But that seems like an awful lot like luck, and we all know that if something can eff up, it will. We don't even know if Wormtail is dead or alive; and I have no idea how we're going to pull off resurrecting Voldemort without him. *Damn it!*"

Harry got up and strode over to the window, looking out into the night. He ignored the fact that Dumbledore and Sirius were exchanging glances. He knew quite well that he had been in a beastly mood since the dementor attack, and Wormtail's strange escape. They did not, however, know the reason for this. He still had not told Ron and Ginny that he had lost his invisibility cloak. They had simply not had the time for it; third year had ended with a host of things to talk about,

and the other two were too distracted to notice. Harry knew that the longer he put off telling them, the angrier they would be.

“Listen,” Harry said. “I’m sorry. I’m exhausted. That spell”—they had performed the Fidelius Charm on Sirius’ house here in Godric’s Hollow and at Grimmauld Place—“took a lot out of me.” It was true. Harry was Secret Keeper at Godric’s Hollow, and he had felt the vastness of the trust Sirius was placing in him. It was an astonishingly good feeling, but it left Harry exhausted and vulnerable. Dumbledore, the Secret Keeper at Grimmauld Place again, did not show any sign of it. “I’m going to bed.”

Harry made his way to the comfortable room that his godfather had prepared for him. Not for the first time, Harry wished that he had been able to forgo the annual stay at the Dursleys. He’d spent two weeks with them – exactly two weeks – and then Sirius had come to take him away. Harry had had a great deal of fun seeing the expression on their faces when they saw the flying motorbike.

He stumbled out of his robes and into his pajamas and fell into the bed that was just as warm and comfortable as the bed in Gryffindor Tower. He lay awake for a little while, but soon he drifted off to sleep; the Secret burned gently inside his breast.

He did not know if he dreamed before he saw inside Voldemort’s mind. He only knew that one moment he was awake, and the next he was in an old, grand house. His heart beating fast, he remained a passive observer.

As soon as the pain in his scar released him from his vision, Harry opened his eyes. He was tangled in his sheets, and when he tried to leap out of bed, he fell to the floor. He was both elated and confused at once, so he lay there like a turtle for a few moments, his mind racing. Pettigrew had been there with Voldemort. The old Muggle man – Harry felt a pang of sadness – had died; Voldemort was probably turning Nagini into a Horcrux at this moment.

Once he’d gathered his thoughts, he leapt up and raced out of his room bellowing “SIRIUS!” at the top of his voice. He did not know if Sirius was still awake, did not know how long he had been asleep. By the quality of the night, it had not been very long. He came to a halt

halfway down the stairs when he saw Sirius poke his head out of the kitchen, looking very guilty about something.

“What is it, Harry?” he asked in a rather jovial voice. Dumbledore appeared behind him.

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Tell me you haven’t been discussing that *completely ludicrous and stupid idea* again!”

The other two remained silent.

“We’ll talk about that later,” Harry warned. There was no way Sirius was going to break into Azkaban to get Rookwood; no way in hell. But they had more important things to discuss at the moment, and he was just as glad that Dumbledore was here. “However... my scar hurt just now.”

Sirius and Dumbledore looked shocked. “What?” Sirius said blankly.

Harry nodded. “It was just the same as before. Wormtail found Voldemort, and now they’re both back, and plotting to kill me. Is it weird that I’m happy about that?”

“You’re saying,” Dumbledore began, “that despite our fears that everything had changed, Wormtail managed it after all?”

“Don’t ask me how it happened,” Harry said. He looked over at Sirius. “Have you still got those tickets to the World Cup? We’re going to need them.”

“The World Cup?” Sirius said. He exchanged a weighty glance with Dumbledore. “Haven’t you – er – said that you didn’t want to go?”

That was putting it mildly. When the tickets had arrived two weeks ago – the Ministry was still attempting to make amends with Sirius – Harry had rather vehemently expressed the fact that he absolutely did not want to be anywhere near the Weasleys, even if Ron and Ginny would be there. But matters had obviously changed. Bartemius Crouch Jr. would be there, would already be fighting the Imperius Curse, and would soon be meeting Lord Voldemort.

“I’ve changed my mind,” Harry said shortly.

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The grounds on which over a hundred thousand wizards and witches from all over the world were gathered to watch the Quidditch World Cup was just as packed and loud as Harry had remembered. Peddlers selling omnioculars and other magical paraphernalia were doing a brisk trade as he and Sirius wandered over to their campsite. Harry felt a great sense of relief that they appeared to be going in a completely different direction from where he knew the Weasleys to be. Still, he was quite shocked when he realized who their neighbors were.

Luna Lovegood and her father, Xenophilius, were merrily roasting what looked to be marshmallows (although Harry couldn’t be sure, as they were about ten times the size of any marshmallows he’d seen in the Muggle world) over a small fire. They appeared to be having a friendly argument – probably about whether or not Crumple Horned Snorkacks could be found in Sweden, as opposed to Norway. He grinned.

“Hey, Luna!” he said loudly. Sirius, who had heard a great deal about his blond friend, looked around with interest.

“Hi, Harry!” she said brightly.

“Hi,” Harry said to Xenophilius. “You must be Luna’s dad. I’m Harry Potter.”

The unkempt wizard stared at him (with the one eye that was not pointed inward at his nose), gaping. His eye flickered to Harry’s scar, and Harry began to feel slightly uncomfortable under his close scrutiny. “Ah,” Xenophilius said. “You look exactly how I thought you would. You’ve got the look of the Potters.”

“I’m Sirius Black,” Sirius extended his hand. “Harry’s godfather. It’ll be quite the match, eh?” He took in the rather extensive decorating – everything from the tent to the cauldron was green. “Rooting for Ireland, then?”

“Yes,” Luna said happily. “How long have you been here, Harry?”

“Just got in,” Harry said easily. “You?”

“Oh, we’ve been here for a week,” Xenophilius answered. “Couldn’t get any better tickets than that.”

“I heard it’s been a problem,” Sirius said. “We wouldn’t have been able to get anything nearly this good if the Ministry weren’t still feeling horribly guilty about throwing me into Azkaban without a trial.”

“Yes, yes, we heard,” Xenophilius said. “Horrible, what they did. But I’ve always suspected,” he said stoutly, “that the Ministry is infected with Wrackspurts – they’re small beings that cause the brain to numb and, though invisible, are able to do quite a bit of damage. I’ve got some charms to protect against them, but the Heads of the various Departments have refused my warnings time and again.”

Harry snorted, and Sirius barked with laughter. Luna and her dad did not look offended in the slightest. They spent the next several hours (after setting up their tent and returning to the Lovegoods with butterbeer and snacks) roundly abusing the Ministry. Sirius was so enthralled with the Wrackspurt Theory, that he invented “proof” of their existence, citing details of when he had been caught. When Xenophilius began to take notes, Harry suspected that the Quibbler would have another article about it in the next edition.

Harry could not help but wonder what Ron and Ginny were up to at the moment. Was Hermione with them? He could almost see Mr. Weasley trying to light a match, his face alight with glee while Hermione looked on, fondly exasperated. An image of the rune he had drawn last year during class flashed before his eyes, and he forced himself to turn to Luna and ask “Do Crumple Horned Snorkacks fly?”

All too soon, Harry, Sirius, and the Lovegoods had to part. The Lovegoods continued on to their seats in the middle of the stands, and Harry loitered a bit, pretending to watch a particularly loud peddler selling his wares. He was, in reality, bracing himself. He found it slightly ironic that he did not dread seeing the Malfoys at all.

"The match is about to begin," Sirius pointed out finally. "Let's go."

Harry nodded, and they made their way to the Top Box. Harry forced himself to go faster than he was wont to do.

They were already there. Harry's eyes sought them out against his own volition, and the gang of redheads was arrayed in the bottom row. Ginny was seated next to Ron. Harry grinned despite himself when he saw Hermione next to him, sitting awfully close. The twins were laughing loudly with Bill and Charlie, while their mother and father spoke to Percy in quiet voices. Mrs. Weasley had obviously used the extra ticket provided by Harry's absence.

"Sirius Black!" Cornelius Fudge said jovially. "So glad you could make it! And – you've brought Harry Potter! How excellent, truly excellent."

"Hello, Minister," Sirius said pleasantly. "Thank you for the tickets."

"Anything at all," Fudge waved his arm expansively. Harry repressed the urge to roll his eyes. No reaction from the Weasleys yet. Fred and George were probably making too much noise for them to hear.

Sirius looked around for empty seats. Harry nudged him, and gestured toward two seats that were close to Winky the house-elf and, under an invisibility cloak, Mr. Crouch's son. They also happened to be the only seats left, and right next to Lucius Malfoy.

"What're you doing here, Potter?" Draco Malfoy asked sullenly.

"I've come to enjoy the game," Harry replied, very conscious of the fact that all the Weasleys had stiffened at the mention of his name. "Who'd you have to pay off to get here?"

"Father was invited by the Minister himself," Draco scowled.

"Is that right?" Sirius placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "So are we. Lucius," he added pleasantly. "Cousin Narcissa. You're looking well."

Harry did not like the dangerous undercurrents, so he resolved to sit between Sirius and the Malfoys. Sirius knew who was sitting in the supposedly empty seat next to Winky as well as he did.

“What’re you talking about ‘cousin?’” Draco asked.

“My aunt and uncle,” Sirius said very slowly, as though speaking to a rather stupid child. Harry suppressed the urge to cheer. “Were your grandmother and grandfather, which generally means that your mother and I are cousins. Speaking of family,” Sirius added cheerfully to Narcissa, who appeared as though she were carved from a piece of wood. “Andromeda – remember her? Your sister? – is doing very well. Her husband is a pretty great guy. I’m afraid I can’t say anything like that of Bella, though. Azkaban has made her even more insane. And to think we all used to be one big, happy Black family...”

“To much inbreeding,” Harry said sadly, unable to resist. With the drama playing out between the Malfoys and Sirius, he could almost ignore the fact that the Weasleys were staring at him.

“We’re lucky to have escaped the madness, Cissy,” Sirius said.

“Yes, quite,” Narcissa said, eyes straight forward.

“Sirius Black is actually our cousin?” Draco said, aghast. Harry heard Ron snort. Deciding that he had let Sirius play long enough, Harry sat in the chair behind Hermione.

“Hi, Harry,” she said. She smiled, though she looked apprehensive. Harry understood completely.

“Hi, Hermione,” he said. “Sirius, this is my friend Hermione. From school. The two of you didn’t actually get a chance to meet last time.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Black,” Hermione said politely.

“Call me Sirius,” he told her. “Mr. Black was my father, and he was a right old bastard.”

“Er, Sirius,” she was taken aback. Harry couldn’t blame her.

“Do you know the Malfoys as well?” Sirius asked. Harry groaned. Sirius had apparently taken it upon himself to distract Harry as much as possible. “My cousin Cissy, her husband Lucius, and their son Draco?”

"We've met," Hermione said cautiously. "Well, I've met Draco, anyway." She didn't mention that she had met Lucius Malfoy two years prior, and he had been rude about her parents.

"How has your summer been?" Harry asked her, before Sirius could say anything else. "I'm surprised to see you here," he lied. "I didn't know you were coming."

"So am I," Draco said. "Did your *Muggle* parents pay them to take you here?" He was obviously not confident enough to call her a 'Mudblood,' but the insinuation was clear. As was his thinly veiled insult directed at the Weasleys, and their ongoing struggle for money.

"Boys," Arthur Weasley said when Fred and George stood up. They reluctantly sat back down.

"Actually, Draco," Harry said. "I'm a bit surprised that you're here, too. After all the stories that Sirius has told me about your Aunt Bellatrix..." he let his voice trail away. Then added, "I'm actually pretty proud of the fact that the Ministry doesn't blame all of her relatives for being a murderous bitch. Obviously they've come a long way since they threw my godfather in Azkaban without a trial or evidence."

He chanced a glance at Ron. His shoulders were shaking with silent laughter. Then he fixed his eyes back on Draco.

"Come to think of it," Sirius stretched lazily in his chair. "I was glad to hear that the two of you, Cissy, Lucius, were able to escape going to Azkaban. You must have been so pleased that they believed that you were under the Imperius Curse."

"Yes," Lucius said. Harry saw that his brow was beaded with sweat. *He should be sweating*, Harry thought, grimly satisfied. *And not because of Sirius. Barty Crouch is sitting right there, listening to every word.* "We were lucky that the Ministry was wise enough to know that we were innocent of the crimes of which we were initially accused."

"Luckier than me," Sirius grinned. "Ah well. The Ministry figured it out in the end, thanks to Harry and his friends."

At least he hadn't mentioned Ron and Ginny by name. The tension in the Top Box was so heavy that it felt like a physical weight on Harry's chest. Harry was proud of Sirius' indirect accusations toward the Malfoys, and he could see himself having quite the laugh over it with Ron and Ginny once they returned to school. But he had the feeling that it was about to get ugly.

"Haven't you heard, cousin Sirius?" Draco's blue eyes were alive with malice. Harry saw Ron straighten up rather abruptly. He didn't dare look at the other Weasleys, but the tension had grown even greater. He drew his wand, but kept it against his leg.

"Shut up, Malfoy," Harry said quietly. Everyone seemed to be holding their breath, mindful of the fact that they were all currently sitting in plain view of the highest officials in the Ministry of Magic. Hermione squeaked.

Draco was apparently too stupid to realize this; or perhaps he was betting on the fact that he was untouchable. "He doesn't *know*, Potter?" he said gleefully. "They're not his friends any longer. We all thought that Potter and Ron Weasley were... close, but it turns out that Potter and the Weasley girl were fooling us all. I heard that —"

His voice abruptly cut off. His ugly smirk faded off his face once he realized that he'd been silenced. He finally realized that he was surrounded by people with wands who had every interest in hexing him into next week, and judging by the look on all the Weasleys' faces, they were a word away from not caring the slightest that the Minister was around.

"Control your son," he told Lucius Malfoy coldly.

"You just did underage magic," Lucius pointed out, though he had paled considerably. "Right in front of the Minister of Magic. How are you in any position to make threats?"

"Actually, I'm the one that silenced Draco," Sirius said easily.

"And I don't need to make threats," Harry said.

“I’m disappointed in you, Cissy,” Sirius continued. His tone was still pleasant. “You’ve managed to raise a very stupid son. I only hope it doesn’t get him into trouble one day.”

“My son is not—“

“Back off,” Harry said. He and Lucius Malfoy stared at each other for a long, intense moment. Harry was surprised to find that he had remained seated. He had better control of himself than he thought. He counted it as a good thing that he did not have his wand pointed directly at Lucius Malfoy’s head.

Malfoy broke the contact first, and Harry felt a thrill. He’d seen a bit of fear in the Death Eater’s eyes. Lucius had learned a little early this time that Harry did not like to be messed with. Still, he felt an immense sense of relief when Ludo Bagman announced the beginning of the game.

“Don’t think this is over, Potter,” Lucius growled softly several minutes later.

“One more word,” Harry whispered, “and I’ll tell everyone in this box that you were the one to plant the diary on Ginny Weasley. You might wriggle out of it with the Minister, but the Weasleys already hate you and your son almost as much as they hate me. I wouldn’t push them; you’re just lucky that the older Weasleys were able to control their sons.”

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“Well, wasn’t that interesting?” Sirius said. The game was over – and so was the Quidditch match. As they approached their tent, Harry’s body began to relax. “For the most part, I had quite a lot of fun,” Sirius admitted. “The match was pretty exciting, too.”

“You were brilliant,” Harry said, grinning. “Did you see the looks on their faces? Narcissa was trembling, she was so afraid of what you would say next. Did you take the Silencing Charm off Draco?”

Sirius shrugged. “How could I possibly remember such a small detail like that?”

Harry laughed.

“Sometimes I see a lot of your father in you,” Sirius said. “Not always – you’re just as much like Lily. But I think James would’ve been very proud of you tonight. Not only did you make a Death Eater back off, but you did it right under the Minister’s nose.”

“Do you – do you really think he’d be proud of me?” Harry asked. Despite everything, he felt like he actually was fourteen years old for a moment.

“That’s a silly question,” Sirius told him. “Your dad was a bit arrogant, and he’d be almost intolerable knowing that he had a son like you.”

Harry felt warmth spread from his toes to his fingers, as if he had just consumed large quantities of chocolate after meeting a dementor or two. He’d started to wonder if his parents would worry about how hard he’d become after seeing nearly everyone he loved die. “I’m going to see them, you know,” Harry said, he lowered his voice, even though he rather doubted that anyone could hear them over the din the Irish were making.

“What do you mean?” Sirius asked, perplexed. “How could you see them?”

“P^riori Incantatem,” Harry said. “They’re going to come out of his wand. Not... It won’t *really* be them. Just shades. But they’ll be able to talk and everything. I’m not sure if I’m really looking forward to it, or if I’m dreading it.”

“Understandable,” Sirius threw his arm over Harry’s shoulders. “I would try not to worry about it too much, Harry. I know you’re going to, but there’re a lot of things that are going to happen between now and then. And I want you to promise me something.”

“What?” Harry asked.

“Try to let loose a little,” Sirius said. “Have fun with your friends. You’ve been given an amazing chance to build new memories with them; there’s not much I wouldn’t give to have another seven years at Hogwarts with your father, mother, and Moony. Not”—he added

hastily when he saw the look on Harry's face—"that I'm going to do what you did. Too much would go wrong."

"I'm afraid that too much has already gone wrong here," Harry confessed after a moment. "What if I've already screwed something up? Wormtail... it's a pretty wild fluke that he's where he's supposed to be. I get chills just thinking about how close we were to losing everything. And... about my friends."

He paused.

"Yes?" Sirius said.

Harry took a deep breath. "I'm going to tell Neville and Hermione what's going on as soon as the Goblet of Fire is lit, the night before my name comes out of it. I don't think it's wrong to think that I might lose them. We *have* been deceiving them for three years."

"I don't think you understand it from our perspective," Sirius said quietly. "What you and Ron and Ginny have done... I had never heard of that kind of bravery, and that kind of love. I know what you three had to go through to get back here."

"When our only other choice was to stay and live out the rest of our lives alone, it was the easiest decision in the world," Harry said.

Two surprises awaited Harry that night. The first surprise happened when they finally made it to their tent and saw who had joined Luna and her father: Ron, Ginny, and Hermione sat around the campfire, flushed with laughter. Harry stood in the shadows for a moment, just watching them, drinking them in.

"Harry!" Hermione said. She was shocked to see him once he'd stepped toward him.

"Hello, again," he beamed. "How'd you get away?"

"Mum and Dad were a bit flustered," Ron said. "Luna found us after the match, and told them that her dad wanted to give them a bit of a break."

“Once they’d made him promise to keep us out of trouble,” Ginny added, “they agreed readily enough.”

“It helped that the Malfoys are staying near us,” Ron said. “I think they wanted us as far away from them as possible.”

“Xeno!” Sirius greeted the older man with exuberance, even though he had just met the man today. “Should we finish our interview? Give the kids a bit of privacy?”

“I don’t know...”

“We’ll be right over there,” Sirius said. “Nothing will happen to them; I’ll make sure of that.”

Hermione looked extremely confused. “Luna, did you know that Harry was staying right next to you?”

“Yes,” Luna said. “That’s why I didn’t tell the Weasleys.”

“And a good thing too,” Ron rolled his eyes. He stood up from a log that had been enchanted to be a most comfortable chair.

Harry hugged him; he did this partly because he was happy to see his friend without Mr. and Mrs. Weasley or his brothers hovering over him, and partly because he had to tell him something. “Scar hurt; Wormtail with Voldemort,” Harry murmured.

Ron jerked back. Harry shrugged.

“Hey, Ginny,” he said. She had grown even more beautiful than the last he’d seen her – not counting the little glimpses he’d had of her during the World Cup. The firelight played in her hair.

“Hey, Harry,” she said.

“Are you sure this is wise?” Hermione asked. “Not that I don’t like – it’s good to have you here, Harry. But if the Weasleys saw us...”

“They won’t,” Ron said comfortably. He leaned down and whispered something (Harry thought he might know what) in Ginny’s ear. His

suspensions were confirmed when she sat up, instantly alert. Harry gave her a very small nod.

"Don't worry, Hermione," Luna said. "No one can separate Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot."

"Thank you, Luna," Hermione said waspishly. "But the Weasleys were very upset today."

Ron laughed. "I forgot we didn't tell you yet!"

"It isn't funny, Ron!" Hermione said. "I thought people were going to start killing each other."

"Sirius Black took the Malfoys down several pegs," Ginny explained. "And then Harry took them down all the way."

All four quickly explained what had happened in the Top Box before the match began.

"You should've seen the look on Lucius Malfoy's face," Ron chortled. "He was dead afraid of Harry and Sirius. He didn't say anything at all, and left even before we did."

"That doesn't change the fact that your family was just as angry with Harry as they were with the Malfoys," Hermione said. "They think you – er – told everyone about... you know."

"Stupid of them," Ginny said sourly.

"Let me guess," Harry said. "The twins didn't automatically confess that they'd told everyone about it in their quest to make me a pariah?"

"No," Ron said shortly.

"Anything else?" Harry asked.

Hermione shook her head. "We came up on Luna and her dad right after that."

“Let’s change the subject,” Ginny said suddenly. She had obviously caught the drift of Harry’s quickly turning mood. “It’s been so long since we’ve all had a conversation together. Let’s not ruin it.”

Harry climbed into the tent he was sharing with Sirius much later that evening after they had walked Ron, Ginny, and Hermione back to the Weasley’s camp with Xeno and Luna (he and Sirius had let them go on the last little bit without them). He’d done his best to create one of those bright moments Sirius had spoken of earlier. He hadn’t been able to truly relax, however, worried as he had been about the Death Eaters attacking the Muggles again. He’d kept alert.

But he needn’t have worried.

Harry awoke the next morning to discover that all had been quiet throughout the night. No Death Eaters having a reunion. No Dark Mark in the sky, terrifying everyone out of their wits. The second surprise.

His most pressing worry for the moment was whether or not (Harry guessed ‘not’ as she had only grown more suspicious in the last few months; what had happened in the Top Box had only fanned her desire to uncover their secret) Hermione would be willing to wait another two months for Harry’s, Ron’s, and Ginny’s confession.

Chapter 19 – The Hardest Task

Harry stared at Barty Crouch – disguised as Alastor Moody – and tried to pretend that he did not, in fact, have any idea that he was a Death Eater whose main goal was to offer Harry up to Voldemort. Harry had gotten used to being at the top of the list of Most Likely People to be Murdered so this did not bother him as much as Ginny seemed to think it should. What shook his self-control was the fact that Neville Longbottom was seated next to him, and Barty Crouch had helped to torture Neville's mother and father into insanity.

It did not help that he now had to sit back and allow the Death Eater to place his classmates under the Imperius Curse. It made him feel slightly ill; what had been funny the first time (without knowledge and maturity) now was ominous. Not that Crouch betrayed anything; he did not show the slightest sign of glee or enjoyment... no, he had nailed the role of Mad-Eye Moody: gruff, paranoid, and no nonsense. Still, Harry took a deep breath when Neville performed astounding acrobatics.

Ron was equally silent. Harry could tell by the set of his jaw (even from across the classroom) that he had the same disturbing thoughts running through his mind. Harry wondered if Ron and Ginny had hated the sight of Scabbers and Harry in the same room. Did they have that same sick feeling that Harry had now, watching Crouch control Neville? He suspected that they had.

"Your turn, Potter!" Crouch called. He took a swig from his flask.

Just in case, Harry tightened his Obfuscation shield. He had no idea whether or not Crouch was a Legilimens. It didn't seem likely, but he was not about to take his chances. He had spent the last two and a half years creating and perfecting the difficult bit of mind magic, and he was finally satisfied that the spiral was complete. Even better, Snape and Dumbledore were satisfied. Ron and Ginny still had a ways to go, but as they would not be meeting Voldemort face to face in a few months, they had more leeway than Harry.

The delicious feeling of not having worries or cares engulfed Harry. The Imperius Curse was not one that he had experienced regularly,

thank Merlin. It seemed to engulf him in a warm blanket. But that warm blanket would smother Harry if he allowed it to. *Jump on the desk*, said the small voice in his head.

And Harry swatted Crouch's control away. He may not be good at casting that particular curse, but his mind was stronger than Crouch's.

"Well done, Potter!" Crouch said loudly. "Did you see that? He fought it off!"

Harry managed a guileless smile. "Didn't feel much like jumping on the desk," he said. "I dunno how I did it."

"But you did!" Crouch said. He was a very good actor, Harry thought. "Twenty points to Gryffindor – everyone, you watch Potter. You can watch him fight it... just look at his eyes."

Hermione left Ron's side (where she was spending more and more time, much to Ron's delight) immediately after class. Harry stifled a groan. He loved Hermione like a sister, but she was absolutely relentless. And despite the fact that she was also suspicious of Ron and Ginny, Harry had the full brunt of her rather rabid thirst for knowledge.

"That was excellent, Harry," she said warmly.

Harry eyed her warily. "Thanks," he said. He had not forgotten how she had cornered him after breakfast. He would not enjoy a repeat performance. *Just a few more weeks*, he thought with both relief and dread. As soon as Dumbledore confirmed that the Goblet of Fire had indeed been Confunded, and that the Ripple Effect had not extended to changing Voldemort's plans, they would tell them.

"I'm pretty impressed," she added. She had that look in her eyes again; she was about to ask a leading question.

Harry tried to head it off. "It's not that big a deal, really," he said evasively. "You ended up throwing it off. So did Ron. And Neville did, too."

“Not as quickly as you,” Hermione pointed out. “Harry,” she said in a very low voice. “You haven’t been *practicing* throwing it off, have you?”

“No,” Harry said quietly. “But – er – ever since Pettigrew did it on me, I’ve been a little afraid of it.”

“Seems a little funny, that’s all,” she said. “Pettigrew had you fully under, and it didn’t break until – what was it you said? He got distracted?”

“Yep,” Harry said. “Maybe I’m just stronger now.”

“But how did you *get* stronger?” she pressed.

Not for the first time, Harry thought that Hermione Granger was too smart for her own good. “Hermione, please,” he said. “My head hurts, and I’m starving. Can we talk about this later?”

She looked as frustrated as he felt. They were standing in a very crowded corridor with students streaming past them; it was not until Dennis Creevy jostled her accidentally and knocked the books out of her hands that she gave it up.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry’s heart was hammering inside his chest as he waited, alone, in the Room of Requirement. This was it; this was the moment. He had only minutes left before Ron and Ginny, and then Hermione, Luna, and Neville would come in through that door. There was a roaring fire in the hearth, yet his fingers trembled.

He’d almost put it off for too long. Hermione had grown increasingly ill-tempered with him – just last night she’d refused to help him with his Ancient Runes homework. She was also speaking in secret to Neville, Harry knew; he felt a sort of morbid curiosity about what they were speculating about.

The door cracked open and Ginny and Ron shuffled in, looking as sick as Harry felt. He wrapped his arms around Ginny.

“Do you have the book?” he asked.

She nodded, and withdrew the copy of *Memories Unbound* that they had bought for her for Christmas during their first year. It seemed almost unreal that they were already in their fourth, and about to tell Hermione and Neville everything.

“Is it just me,” Harry murmured, “or is time going by much faster this time around?”

Ron shook his head. “I can’t believe we’re here already. By this time next year...”

“Voldemort will be wreaking havoc,” Harry finished for him.

Ginny rested her head against his chest, and he stroked her hair. One good thing that came from this year: he and Ginny, by some miracle of their schedules, had much more time alone together.

“All right, Ron?” Harry asked. He had the most to lose of all of them if this went badly. *Stop thinking about that*, he ordered himself.

Ron shrugged. “I’m more worried about this than I am about you facing Voldemort in that graveyard.”

“Thanks,” Harry said dryly, though he understood.

“That’s a done deal,” Ron said. “He takes your blood—“

“—tortures me a bit,” Harry interjected.

“—then challenges you to a duel,” Ron continued as if Harry had not spoken. “You do your *Expelliarmus* bit, and then you scamper.”

“You’re right,” Harry nodded, grinning. “That’ll be much easier than this.”

“If you two don’t shut up about that right now...” Ginny warned. “Although I do see your point,” she added after a moment. Harry kissed the top of her head, knowing that she’d only said something

because she'd felt like she'd had to. Her humor was just as black as theirs at times.

"So," Ron said. "Just to clarify. We're still going with full disclosure?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed. "Except for the fact that I'm a Horcrux too."

"What if Hermione figures it out?" Ginny asked.

"She didn't last time," Harry shrugged. "Would that she had. And if she does... fine. But I'm not going to tell them, and I'd rather you two didn't either. I didn't even tell Sirius and Remus, remember?"

"All right," Ginny murmured.

"Dumbledore's in his office," Harry told them. "He's ensured that he'll be alone for the rest of the night, just in case we need him. And Snape—"

"—has the twins occupied," Ron interrupted. "We know."

Harry let go of Ginny and paced the floor. The Room of Requirement produced a thick, old carpet just for this purpose. It had faded patches, and Harry suspected that he was not the first to pace on it, his feet showing his worry of their own accord. His stomach clenched whenever he made a turn.

"We're here!" Luna said brightly, and Harry's stomach made a steep dive, and he felt like he had the times he had fallen off his broomstick. Neville, Luna, and Hermione had obviously come together. They filed in, one right after another. *Luna already knows*, Harry told himself. *At least we don't have to worry about her.*

"Hi," Harry, Ron, and Ginny chorused weakly.

"Hello," Neville said, looking around curiously at the room. Instead of a large, empty area that they made use of to practice dueling and other spells, a series of cozy armchairs sat next to the fire.

"What's all this?" Hermione knit her brows together. "I thought we were practicing tonight? And... we're all together?"

Harry licked his lips, and nervously flattened his hair. "I – well – let's sit down."

"Yes!" Ron said enthusiastically. He grabbed Hermione's hand and pulled her to the nearest chair. Funnily enough, Harry thought, it was just large enough for the both of them.

"Great idea, Harry," Ginny said.

Once they were all seated – Luna upon a Japanese-style mat – Harry stared around at them. His throat had closed up tightly, and he could not think of anything to say.

"What's this all about?" Hermione asked, breaking the silence.

"Are you going to tell us your secret now?" Neville's mouth was slightly open.

"Yes," Harry said, relieved. Ginny, beside him, nodded.

Hermione immediately sat upright. "You mean that after all these months of dodging us you're finally going to tell us? Why now? Why not then?"

"Didn't think you were ready," Ron said quietly. Hermione bristled at this, and turned to glare at him, but something in his eyes must have changed her mind, for she seemed to change her mind.

"Is it really that big of a secret?" she asked uncertainly.

"Huge," Harry said.

"The biggest," Ginny said.

There was another long moment of silence. Neville broke it this time by saying, "would it help you if we asked questions?"

"I have a list," Hermione said. She pulled a piece of parchment out of her bag. "I'm glad I had this with me; I almost dropped the bag off in the common room."

Harry eyed it warily.

“That looks a bit long,” Ron said. He squinted at it. “And tiny writing.”

“Neville and I have been working on it for a while,” Hermione said defensively. “We started it in the Hospital Wing right after the dementors attacked us. Which brings us to the first question: How did you, Ron, know that Pettigrew was on the grounds?”

“That’s easy,” Ron said, relieved. “I have this thing called the Marauder’s Map. It shows everyone on Hogwarts grounds, and where they are. I nicked it from Fred and George a while ago.”

Hermione nodded. “That makes sense... although I wouldn’t expect them to be able to use such a complex enchantment.”

“Fred and George are smarter than people give them credit for,” Ginny told her.

“And besides,” Harry said. “It wasn’t them that enchanted it. The Marauders went to school in the seventies... one of them was my dad, in fact. The others were Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew. They went by Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs.”

“I have a question,” Neville said. “Are you a Seer, Harry? A real one, not like – er – Professor Trelawney.”

“Definitely not,” Harry answered. “Although – you’ll be interested to know – she was the one who made the prophecy about Voldemort and me.”

“Do you know what the prophecy says?” Hermione asked. “All of it?”

Harry, Ron, and Ginny stared at each other.

“Hermione,” Ginny said. “Neville. Luna. This is pretty much your last chance to back out. From here on out, we’re going to tell you everything. Are you sure you want to hear about it?”

“It’s a big responsibility,” Harry said. “There’s a reason why we haven’t told you before.”

Hermione and Neville both took a deep breath and nodded. Luna fiddled with her hair. Harry took this to mean that she understood. Harry wondered if they knew that their lives were probably going to change drastically. Maybe not physically, but Harry had a feeling that Hermione's worldview was going to be rocked when they told her that they had done the almost impossible. He was glad that Hermione had softened toward Luna (the fact that Luna had an intuitive grasp of Ancient Runes helped); Luna would help her.

"Do you miss having a crown?" Luna said suddenly.

"What?" Harry said blankly.

"You know," she said. "You aren't a king anymore. Do you miss it?"

Ginny laughed first. Then Ron and Harry. When Luna started to giggle as well, Harry realized that this was why she'd done it. She wanted them to laugh. Some of the knots that had formed in his belly uncoiled, and he felt a great affection for Luna. Neville and Hermione joined them, albeit uncertainly, and Harry thought that things just might turn out to be all right.

"Next question," Ron said.

"You didn't answer mine," Hermione pointed out.

"I know the whole prophecy," Harry said. "And it's basically this: I've got to defeat Voldemort, and I'm the only one who can do it."

Hermione, Luna, and Neville stared at him, eyes wide. "Oh Harry," Hermione whispered. "Are you scared?"

"Not for the reason you think," Harry answered honestly. "I know how Voldemort can be defeated. Don't"—Harry ordered when Hermione, Neville, and Luna flinched at the name—"be afraid of his name. Anyway, I know what we've got to do. What I'm afraid of is how many people are going to die before he can be stopped."

"That's why you've been training us," Neville said slowly. "I know you told me that last year, but..."

“Feels more real now?” Ron asked. “I know the feeling, mate, believe me.”

“Why me, though?” Neville asked. “I’m getting better, but...”

“You just need more confidence,” Ginny said. “And try to get a better wand. I know it was your dad’s, but wands always work better when they’ve chosen you. And we’ll work hard this year... you’ll start learning more spells.”

Harry thought of the time when all six of them had gone on an ill-advised rescue mission to the Ministry of Magic. He remembered thinking that of all the members of Dumbledore’s Army, he wouldn’t have chosen Ginny, Neville, and Luna to come with them. But Harry had a clearer vision of them now, and he knew exactly what he needed to say.

“Listen,” he said. He stared at Hermione, Neville, and Luna in turn. “Trust me when I say that of all the students at Hogwarts, I need your help the most. I can’t do this alone. You have a choice, you know. I’m not going to force you to help—“

“You have a choice too,” Luna said unexpectedly.

“You could, I dunno, move to Australia or Russia,” Neville said.

“But you won’t,” Hermione smiled. “And we won’t either.”

“I hope you don’t regret saying that,” Harry said quietly.

“I hope we have a few years yet,” Hermione said. “We don’t know when he’ll return—“

“Yes, we do,” Ron interrupted. “Which is why we waited until now to tell you. We know for sure when he’s coming back, thank Merlin.”

“He’s coming back on June 24th,” Ginny said.

“My name,” Harry said, “is going to come out of the Goblet of Fire tomorrow. I’ll go through all the tasks. And when I win, the cup is

going to turn out to be a Portkey. It's going to take me to a graveyard, where Voldemort is going to be resurrected."

"What?" Hermione said. "How do you – if that really is the case – why aren't you going to stop it?"

"Stop it?" Ron asked. "We're not going to stop it. We've actively worked to this point. And trust me, it hasn't been easy."

"You're – I can't believe – are you telling me that you *want* You-Know-Who to come back?"

"He has to," Ginny said simply. "Otherwise he'll never be defeated. He'll always be a threat."

"Explain," Neville said, his jaw clenched.

"Voldemort has Horcruxes," Ron said. "He didn't die when his curse rebounded off of Harry because of them. He stuck bits of his soul – believe me, you don't want to know how he did this – into a bunch of different physical objects."

"They keep him immortal," Ginny said.

"Before Voldemort can be destroyed completely," Harry added, "they've got to be destroyed too; otherwise he'll always be around, lurking in the dark corners of the world waiting for someone to give him back a body. Pettigrew is that someone."

"We wanted Voldemort's return to be on our terms – or as much as it can be," Ron said. He fiddled with his wand and jiggled his legs. Any minute now, Hermione (or possibly Neville) was going to ask how they could know all of this. "Voldemort's a right nasty bastard. We're the last ones to say that this is going to be at all easy."

Neville looked sick. "That reminds me of the stories my Gran – my other Gran, my mum's mum – used to tell me about Koschej the Deathless. He was a Russian wizard who hid his death inside a needle, which was inside a fish, which was inside a bird... you get the point. And it's sort of like that? He's got his death hidden?"

“Er – yeah, I guess,” Harry, who had not really understood the historical reference, said. “Except that there’s more than one.”

“Harry, don’t you think you should tell someone about this?” Hermione said nervously. “Dumbledore could—“

“Dumbledore knows,” Ginny assured her.

“So does Snape,” Ron said. “We told them the first day of classes – remember how you didn’t think we were under the Confuzzle Draught? We needed to get to them without causing suspicion.”

“But the two of you were eleven years old then!” Hermione said. “How could you possibly have known all of this? Harry was living with Muggles!”

Harry’s palms were sweating; he wiped them off on his robes. “We knew because... because we’ve been here before; we’ve lived this before.”

“What?” Neville said blankly.

“It’s true,” Luna spoke up. “Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere traveled from the future.”

“Luna...” Hermione said. “That’s completely impossible and you know it.”

Ginny pulled out *Memories Unbound* from underneath her robes. With shaking fingers, she turned it to the correct page, and handed it to Hermione. Hermione took it automatically and stared down at it, bewildered.

“No,” she shook her head. “No, no, no way is this possible.”

“It is,” Ron said gently. “Trust us.”

“What is it?” Neville asked.

“The Tears of Merlin,” Hermione said. “They’re claiming that they used the Tears of Merlin to send their memories back. It’s a fairy tale – they couldn’t possibly have—“

“We did,” Harry said. “Neville... didn’t you wonder why we were so angry at Lockhart for Obliviating me? Ron thought he’d erased all the memories I had of the future...”

“Even if this *is* true,” Hermione said icily. Her expression was frozen in a horrible grimace of disbelief. She’d crossed her arms and legs so tightly that Harry fully expected to hear her bones snap. “You just spent the last half hour telling us that you know how to defeat You-Know-Who! If you *really do* know how to do it, why didn’t you just – I don’t know – do it in your own time?”

Apparently she thought her logic infallible, for she now looked a little smug as well as angry.

“We did,” Harry said. “We defeated Voldemort—“

“—Harry defeated him,” Ron interjected.

“Then why come back?” Neville asked. He was not as rigid as Hermione was, but he was still skeptical.

“They *didn’t come back*, Neville,” Hermione said. “I can’t believe that you said you were finally going to tell us the truth, and now you’re telling us a bunch of lies!”

“We aren’t lying,” Ginny said.

“Even if the Tears of Merlin is true, I can’t imagine why you’d be that desperate—“

“Oh yeah?” Ron said loudly. “Maybe you should ask yourself why you aren’t with us. Everyone in this room – practically every damn person in this castle – died fighting Voldemort. You, Neville, Luna... our entire family. I’m not going to give you the whole damn list of everyone who died – we don’t have the time.”

“Try to picture everyone you love dead, Hermione,” Ginny said, “except for two other people. And yes, you are absolutely right. We were – are – desperate.”

“The price we paid to defeat Voldemort for the first time was far too high,” Harry said. “We lived like ghosts for *three years* after we lost all of you...”

“Until Harry had the idea to go back in time,” Ron said.

“Which I actually got from you,” Harry said to Hermione.

She raised her eyebrows. She’d softened a bit, but she was far from believing their wild tale. “But wasn’t I supposed to be dead?”

“You were,” Harry said. “But I was thinking of you, and I remembered your Time-Turner – the one you used to get to all your classes last year.”

“How did you know --?”

“I told you,” Harry said impatiently. “I’ve lived this before. So... I had this wild idea that we could go back and change things—“

“We didn’t listen to him at first,” Ginny put in. “We knew a Time-Turner wouldn’t work, and we told him that but Harry wouldn’t let it go.”

“And then I remembered what you had said about time traveling and how Time-Turners are the most reliable way—“

“Which they are,” Hermione admitted grudgingly. “But mostly because the other ways are supposed to be impossible. Are still most likely impossible.”

“Hermione,” Neville said suddenly. “I think they’re telling the truth. Look, it explains everything: how they knew about the basilisk, why they were so hacked off at Lockhart, why they’re so insistent that we train.”

“Just today you were certain that they were Seers!” Hermione said. “You didn’t think that it could be explained any other way; you’ve changed your mind awfully quickly!”

“It made sense,” Neville admitted. “But now I know the truth – and it’s kind of similar, I guess. They weren’t just foreseeing... they’ve lived through all this before.”

“It’s true,” Luna said.

Hermione looked at her scathingly. “You’ll believe anything, I—” But she interrupted herself, eyes widening. “You could tell her, but you couldn’t tell us?”

“She guessed,” Ron said, smiling a little. “She knew right away.”

Hermione paused for a moment. The minutes ticked by, and Harry watched her apprehensively. He could practically feel her thinking. Her eyes were vague, though she kept narrowing them. He knew that she was not trying to put the pieces together. She was trying to find some argument that would shatter what they were saying; Harry could not pretend that he had not expected this. Once, Neville opened his mouth to speak, but she held her hand up sharply.

She looked at them triumphantly. “All right,” she said slowly. “If this is true... if you really are from the future... don’t you think that it was a bit stupid of you to alienate the Weasleys again? They’ve made it awfully difficult for you to carry out your plans. And before you say that you and Ginny didn’t get caught – you know – last time, Ron told me ages ago that your parents were suspicious of you even before that. Why didn’t you... I don’t know... work a little harder to gain their trust?”

“First of all,” Harry said, “Ginny and I wouldn’t have been caught together – at least not until after my sixth year – because we didn’t get together until then. This time it’s different – we’ve been in love for years and years now...”

“And second of all,” Ginny said quietly. “My parents loved Harry very much. He was like another son to them.”

"Sometimes I think they liked him more than they liked me," Ron smiled a little sadly.

"That's ludicrous," Hermione said flatly. "There's no way that people would change that much."

"But they haven't really changed," Harry said. "They're protective of their children, they're loving and kind, and they'll do anything to keep those they love from harm. It's just... I don't fall under that category anymore."

"And there are two reasons for that, I think," Ron said. "The first... do you remember that stupid article? 'Don't trust Harry Potter, he might be some kind of baby Dark Lord, blah blah blah.' There was nothing like it where we came from. Mum and Dad had no reason whatsoever to worry, and so they were able to get to know Harry without worrying that he was going to go Dark."

"And the second reason," Ginny said, "is that they've seen the changes in us. Dad's said that on more than one occasion, and so has Mum. They think it's Harry's influence, and they're afraid that if we continue to be around him, we'll change even more. They're afraid that if Harry goes Dark, so will we."

"Not that that would happen," Harry said.

Hermione stared at each of them in turn. She'd relaxed somewhat, and she looked utterly confused. Neville seemed to have taken the idea of the time travel better, but still... his brows were knit together as he stared at a point somewhere over Harry's left shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said finally. "But I'm going to have to ask that you prove it. I just can't believe it without proof, and I have no idea how you're going to do so."

"How about with a Pensieve?" Ron asked. "We'll show you some of the memories we have."

"And Pensieves can't be hoodwinked," Hermione muttered to herself. She trailed off, and Harry could see that she was analyzing everything she knew about Pensieves and objective memories. "All

right,” she said. “If you can actually show these memories you have inside a Pensieve, then I’ll have to believe you, mustn’t I?”

“Dumbledore’s got one,” Harry said immediately. “I can just ask him to—“

But before he could stand up and send a message by Patronus to Albus Dumbledore asking for his assistance, a Pensieve and a small table appeared before them. “This is a pretty incredible room,” Harry said. He wondered if the Room of Requirement had provided a completely different Pensieve, or if the one in Dumbledore’s office had suddenly gone on walkabout.

He tapped his chin thoughtfully with his wand, and ducked when red sparks shot out of the end. He ended up giving Neville, Hermione, and Luna more memories than he had given Sirius and Remus. He put in the original prophecy as he had heard it in his fifth year in Dumbledore’s office; he gave them a few bits from the original Dumbledore’s Army (including when Neville had produced his corporeal Patronus); and he also put in a few battles that they had successfully had against Death Eaters. He then skipped a large portion of time, and showed them a brief picture of the aftermath of the battle (though he was careful not to show them their bodies), and the time Harry, Ron, and Ginny had decided to come back.

Ron and Ginny also walked over to add their own memories, though Harry had no idea what they might be. It felt very solemn, almost like a ceremony, and Hermione, Neville, and even Luna watched them with a soberness that belied their age (and Luna’s nature).

“This may take awhile,” Harry said quietly.

Hermione gave them a long, searching look. She didn’t say anything, but took a deep breath and dove into the memories. Neville and Luna followed immediately after.

“What memories did you give them?” Harry asked as soon as the other three had disappeared.

Ron shuffled his feet. "I wanted to show her that Mum and Dad loved you," he said. "She seemed to find it pretty impossible to believe, so I..."

"I showed them all some quiet, happy times that we had," Ginny said, "without being threatened by the war and Voldemort. And I showed them what really happened to Pettigrew. They were going to ask anyway."

Harry sat, and Ginny immediately plopped down into his lap. He put his arms around her middle, and she leaned up against him. Ron took Harry's place and began to pace the carpet, looking at the Pensieve and the swirling, silver substance inside it every few seconds. The dread he'd felt for what seemed like months began to seep away. There was no turning back now; Harry could not take back the words he had said, the truths he had told, or the memories he had given. It was done.

It seemed to take a very long time before Hermione, Neville, and Luna emerged from the Pensieve. Even Luna, who had known for quite a long time, looked ashen faced. Harry could not tell what they were thinking; he could not even begin to guess what was going through Hermione's mind.

"It's real," Hermione finally whispered. She burst into tears. Ron was at her side in seconds, and he hugged her. She buried her face and kept sobbing. Harry had no idea why this was so upsetting to her; he thought she'd be screaming at them for lying to her for these past few years.

"I still don't really understand," Neville said. "I kind of hope that I never have to."

"Me too," Harry said fervently. "Hermione... are you all right?"

"Of course I'm not all right!" Hermione pulled back from Ron. "I thought you were lying... I didn't—"

"Doesn't matter," Ron said. "You believe us now."

Harry thought she might be a little afraid of the battles in her future – he did not blame her. “You don’t have to fight, you know. Any of you. I know – believe me, I know – how dangerous it might get.”

“And if you think you might want to... step back,” Ginny said, “we certainly won’t blame you.”

“I think a Wrackspurt has gotten a hold of Guinevere and Arthur,” Luna said dreamily. “Possibly several of them.”

Hermione mopped her eyes on her robes. “You know what, Luna? I think you’re right about that.” Harry gaped at her.

“They are being pretty stupid,” Neville agreed.

“Er,” Harry said. “Listen—“

“No, you listen!” Hermione said. “Obviously you need a few things explained to you. *You came back for us.*”

Harry had heard this before from Sirius. But he didn’t know why everyone was so shocked and grateful. He was dragging them one by one into a war with the most evil wizard who had ever lived. He needed their help – all of them. They were putting themselves at risk; it was certain that they would be placing themselves in mortal peril. He was going to do everything he could to save them all, but that did not change the fact that they could die again.

He told them this.

“We realize that, Harry,” Hermione said. “You’ve just shown us. But you could’ve stayed in the future. Instead, you came back for us—“

“We’d do it again in a heartbeat,” Ron informed her. He was making absolutely no effort to disguise how much he loved her. “So don’t feel like you owe us, or something.”

“That’s not how love and friendship work,” Hermione said softly.

“I suppose it isn’t,” Ginny said.

Harry still did not quite understand it, but he heaved a huge, heartfelt sigh of relief anyway. “Thank you,” he said.

“We thought you’d be angry,” Ron said, still staring at Hermione.

“Don’t be thick, Ron,” Hermione said waspishly. “Now. Harry. Do you know what this ‘terrible power’ is?”

Harry shook his head. “Not really. At least I don’t think I do.”

She nodded. “All right. I’ll start doing research immediately. While we”—she indicated herself, Neville, and Luna—“are practicing, you will too. All three of you,” she said sternly. Harry, Ron, and Ginny grinned at the bossy tone in her voice. “We can order more books from Flourish and Blotts, or maybe we can get some out of the Restricted Section in the library. And you’re going to keep learning spells until we’ve got the right one.”

“Er,” Harry said.

“You wanted my help!” Hermione said impatiently. “And you just said that you don’t know what the terrible power is. Maybe you’ve got to look for it.”

“She’s probably right,” Ginny said.

Hermione’s face was alight with excitement. “And Dumbledore will probably have some ideas...”

Despite himself, Harry could not help but feel a small, unfurling hope. Maybe there was something like the Hallows – a safe way to ensure his survival. He would never, ever make a Horcrux, but he was the last person to say that he knew everything about magic. He might not have to die...

HPHPHPHPHPHPHP

“I’ve got them counted, Hagrid,” Charlie Weasley said warningly. Harry could not blame him; Hagrid was eying the dragon eggs with longing. He choked back a laugh; the Disillusionment Charm made him invisible, and did not cause the others around him to go deaf.

Hagrid groaned. He tore his eyes away from the large eggs, and instead turned to look at the Hungarian Horntail. "She's a real beauty," he said softly.

Charlie nodded. "We almost didn't bring her, you know. We didn't know there would be a fourth contestant. Say, Hagrid... are you still friends with Harry Potter?"

Hagrid's chest swelled out. "Aye," he said importantly. "See 'im at least once a week; he likes to come by for tea."

"Do you know why he put his name in the Goblet of Fire?" Charlie asked. Harry began to look for escape routes. It had been very stupid of him to think that his name would not come up. "Was it just for attention, do you think?"

"He said he didn' do it," Hagrid said.

Charlie eyed him skeptically. "You really believe that? I think you might be the only one. Everyone's been yammering about it since Rita Skeeter's article came out."

Harry felt a swell of fury when he remembered that article. He'd refused to have any sort of interview with her, hoping that she would not have enough fodder for a story. Instead, she'd made up facts and managed to paint him as some mad, attention-hungry little boy. Not only that, but she'd taken the opportunity to bring that first article up, the fact that he was a Parseltongue, and the series of adventures he'd had during the last few years. Fortunately, she'd left out any mention of the Weasleys, though Harry feared that it was only a matter of time. If Hermione's plan didn't work...

"Rita Skeeter's a real cow," Hagrid said. "Harry's a good boy, an' if he says he didn' put 'is name in the Goblet o' Fire, then he didn'."

"I'm not so sure about him being a good boy, Hagrid," Charlie said. "You're a teacher; you must know what happened with him and my little sister."

"Didn' say he was perfect," Hagrid said. "Maybe he lost his head an' did summat stupid, but I don' think he meant to hurt Ginny. An' I have

to say it's right sad to see Harry without Ron. They used ter be as thick as thieves."

"Mum and Dad have other concerns and I think they might be valid," Charlie said. "Hagrid... aren't you at all worried about how Potter might turn out?"

"Nah," Hagrid said immediately. Harry was poised on the verge of fleeing and yet wanted to hear Hagrid defend him. He listened closely, suspecting that Hagrid had forgotten that Harry was there. "Harry don' have an evil bone in his body."

"You sound like Percy," Charlie said. "But Mum and Dad reckon that they don't want Ron and Ginny anywhere near him if he exhibits his terrible power."

"I think yer mum an' dad need to remember who it was that went in ter the Chamber o' Secrets an' saved their daughter," Hagrid said stubbornly.

"They remember that perfectly well," Charlie said. "But that doesn't mean that they have to allow Harry to do whatever he wants with Ginny."

Harry did not feel the need to listen anymore. He walked quietly back through the forest and up to the castle. Once he caught himself dwelling on the conversation too much, he pushed it firmly away. He'd decided a while ago that he could not allow his feelings to cloud his judgment, and he had come far, far too close to jumping on Charlie and dragging him to the nearest Pensieve and showing him exactly why he was to be trusted.

He focused instead upon the upcoming task. He was reasonably confident (at least he wasn't nearly paralyzed with fear as he had been last time) that he would manage to get past the dragon. He'd been practicing on his Firebolt every day for the last several months, after all, and his flying skills were still with him. He'd been toying with using some of the new spells in his arsenal that Hermione had insisted he learn, but thought it best to go with what he knew would work.

He finally climbed into his bed that night, utterly exhausted. It was past midnight, and not only had he gone with Hagrid to take a look at the dragons, but he'd spent the three hours prior in the Room of Requirement learning a particularly difficult charm that turned a section of the ground into quicksand – presumably to be done under a Death Eater's feet, but it had been Ron that he'd been practicing on. Harry was certain that it had nothing whatsoever to do with any terrible power that he might have, but it was a handy spell to know.

The next few days sped by, much to Harry's relief. He'd managed to warn Cedric Diggory about the dragons without Crouch listening in. His habit of using the Disillusionment Charm outside of class (the heckling from the other students was just as bad this time around) had also served to allow him to avoid the Death Eater's help.

"Are you nervous?" Hermione whispered at breakfast on the day of the task.

Harry took the time to consider her question. "*Muffliato*," he said, once he'd decided to go with the truth. "About the dragon? A little. Not as much as I was last time... I thought I was going to lose my head and start hexing people before I even got to the task."

She laughed.

"But I am a little nervous of things going sideways this year," Harry said. "We're really lucky that we're at this point. Remember Pettigrew?"

"Hard to forget almost having my soul sucked out by dementors," Hermione said dryly.

"And Sirius is still planning to break into Azkaban and retrieve Rookwood," Harry said darkly. "He doesn't seem to understand that I won't let him. That plan has about a one in a million chance in succeeding."

Hermione didn't reply. It was with no small amount of indignation that Harry realized that she'd turned on him too. She was supposed to be the sensible one; she'd always tried to talk them out of their mad

schemes before. It was enough that Ron, Ginny, and Sirius had told them that he was being unreasonable just two days before.

“Don’t say a word,” he warned her.

“I wasn’t going to,” she said calmly. Then, “I’ve found another few spells that you might find interesting. *Eliotus* causes a windstorm, and it looks remarkably difficult to break free of. Also... I’ve found mention of a spell that will turn someone into smoke for a while.”

“I dunno,” said Harry, though he was intrigued by the smoke idea. “Somehow I don’t think that’s terrible enough.”

She glared at him. “It’s been less than a month, and you’re already arguing with me? You promised you’d do this!”

“I will, I will,” Harry assured her quickly. “I think the new hexes I’ve learned are going to be useful – Merlin knows that I need all the help I can get. If not with Voldemort, then with other Death Eaters. But—“

“How do you expect to find the terrible power if you don’t look for it?” Hermione said severely. “We’ve got to try everything!”

Harry sighed. “You’re right.” He cast around for a change of topic, but found that he did not need one, as Professor McGonagall hurried over to him. He quickly ended the charm he’d cast that had ensured his and Hermione’s privacy.

“It’s time, Potter,” she said. She was rather pale. “You’re to meet the champions now.”

Harry followed her out. He glanced back once to see Ron giving him the thumb’s up sign, and Ginny mouthing “I love you.” He winked at her. Thankfully, the twins were busy with their breakfasts and did not notice this.

If Harry had wondered if he would draw the Hungarian Horntail again, he soon found out that some things remained the same, and this was one of them. He glanced around at the slightly panicked look on Fleur’s, Krum’s, and Cedric’s faces; their fear seemed to steady him.

You're going to be fine, he wanted to tell them. Especially Cedric, though Harry had different reasons for this besides just the dragon.

"Er – you're staring at me, Potter," Cedric's voice broke into his thoughts. As Harry had just been remembering the body he had taken back with him from the graveyard, this startled him.

"Oh," Harry said, managing a weak grin. "Sorry... just nervous."

"That's all right," he said, with a grimace that was obviously meant to be an answering smile.

The minutes passed, and Harry found himself alone in the tent. *Summon the Firebolt, get the golden egg; Summon the Firebolt, get the golden egg; Summon the Firebolt, get the golden egg*, he chanted to himself. He gripped his wand with slightly sweaty palms.

He walked into the enclosure that held the Hungarian Horntail feeling – despite his pounding heart and damp hands – a lot more confident than he had. He did not hesitate, but thought as hard as he could about the Firebolt in his dormitory and shouted "*Accio Firebolt!*"

"Do you even know how to fly, Potter?" Malfoy shouted gleefully. The Slytherins all laughed appreciatively.

Harry thought it might have been better when absolute fear had silenced the crowd. He kept his eyes fixed grimly at the point where his broom would appear. Moments later, it had. He leapt onto it and pulled it up to a dizzying height, and then swooped back down toward the dragon. He flew around it in tight circles. Bursts of flame shot out at him, but he rolled and dived, drawing the Horntail's attention from its eggs.

The cheers were deafening, but Harry ignored them. *Come on*, he thought as he sent his broom in a tight spiral, away from the fire. The Horntail spread its wings... and Harry pushed the Firebolt to its top speed. The ground rose up to meet him... and there it was, the golden egg; he grabbed it and made a sharp turn.

I didn't even get hurt this time, he thought, satisfied.

Author's Note:

Another chapter, done! We're that much closer to the end... The next chapter will prove to be interesting, I believe.

As to my last Author's Note, the second choice won. And for those who were concerned... I don't intend to make anything extremely explicit. This isn't a romance novel. However, Harry's and Ginny's relationship is central to the plot. And, for those who are concerned about the relationship between a fourteen year old girl and a fifteen year old boy... the scene that will be the sexiest will actually be in a flashback (er... flashforward?).

That being said... I'm so happy that Hermione and Neville are (finally!) in on the secret. I knew they'd find out in this chapter, and I really enjoyed writing it. Harry, Ginny, and Ron need their help rather badly.

I also thought that I'd take the time to say a few words about the Weasleys. They're still kind people. I realize that I may have interpreted their characters a bit differently than some, but I think there is ample evidence in the books for their actions. Remember how Molly treated Hermione when she thought that Hermione was stringing both Harry and Viktor Krum along? Or how she treated Mundungus Fletcher, or Sirius? I love her character, but she isn't Mother Theresa. They're only concerned about their family; Harry understands this. I hope you guys do too!

Chapter 20 – Interrogations

Harry's Ancient Runes homework was giving him a headache behind his right eye; it throbbed with increasing intensity. He did not know whether this was due to the effects of studying the ancient mode of writing, or the fact that he'd gotten very little sleep the night before. But they weren't just studying it anymore. As Professor Octavius had warned the year before, the class had grown increasingly difficult. Now they were expected to use the spells they were learning in their other classes.

Harry took off his glasses for a moment and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. *Why didn't Hermione tell us about this last time?* He asked himself. He wished he'd had some inkling that the class would kick his arse. *Not that it hasn't helped*, he admitted grudgingly. Professor Octavius had told them that their skills would increase; and they had. In his weaker moments, Harry just wasn't sure if it was worth it.

He groaned and stared down at the rune – cut into a block of wood – again. It meant 'to summon' (although, as Harry had learned, runes could mean several different things) and he was to practice his Summoning Charm while he looked at it. He did not really understand what this was to accomplish; his efforts thus far did not appear to do anything. He'd Summoned a few bottles of ink, a cushion from an armchair, and Crookshanks with ease, but that was nothing new. And now he had to write half a foot about the supposed changes.

"*Accio* bag," Harry said wearily, pointing his wand at Hermione's overflowing bag. It zoomed toward him.

"Still haven't figured it out?" Hermione said smugly. She'd had an epiphany about an hour ago, and had already filled an entire scroll.

"No," Harry said grumpily. "There's no difference! Professor Octavius *hates* us, I'm certain of it..."

"So does Trelawney," Neville groaned. "Stupid dream diary. I never even remember my dreams; how does she expect me to make predictions?"

“Just make them up,” Harry advised him. “Predict your own death every day... she’ll give you full marks for that.”

Hermione looked scandalized. “Don’t listen to him, Neville! Besides, you should’ve dropped Divination, like I did. What a useless class...”

“I couldn’t,” Neville said sadly. “I didn’t have another class to keep my schedule full. My Gran would kill me if she thought I wasn’t taking my education seriously. I wish I’d taken Ancient Runes...”

“No, you don’t,” Harry told him. “The pain isn’t worth it, trust me.” That reminded him of that stupid rune the professor had made him draw at the end of last term. It felt like it was haunting him; he saw it in his dreams. He couldn’t remember the dreams, but he woke up feeling strangely sad; sometimes he had to blink away the vision of the lightning bolt nestled among other strange patterns.

“Muggle Studies, then,” Neville said. He lowered his voice, “you could’ve warned me that Divination would be terrible!”

“We tried to get you to join us,” Harry pointed out. “You’re the one who – oh, never mind. I’ll help you with the dream diary... I can’t do anything about Ancient Runes – unless Hermione wants to tell me what it is she’s figured out?” He looked at her hopefully.

She grinned and shook her head. “I know it’s awful of me,” she said. She did not appear to care very much; Harry could not help but notice that her eyes sparkled with glee. “But I’m rather enjoying the fact that there are some things you don’t know.”

“Thanks,” Harry said sarcastically, though he smiled back at her. “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.” He understood that, while Hermione was jesting a little, there was also truth to what she said. It had been Ron that had pointed this out long ago.

“If she’s not angry that we lied to her,” Ron said, “she’ll probably feel insecure that we’re better at magic than she is.”

Harry glanced at Ginny uncertainly. It was true. When they sent their memories back, they would have all the skills and knowledge that they had accumulated over the years. Harry had not quite thought of

it this way; he was so used to just assuming that Hermione was better than them – except in certain cases – that it hadn't even crossed his mind that this might no longer be the case.

"She'll still be smarter than we are," Ginny said. "Intelligence and skill are two different things."

They had planned to reassure Hermione at every turn that they needed her bright mind; but Harry's and Ron's difficulties with Ancient Runes did that for them. It also helped that Hermione almost daily witnessed the fact that Harry had to struggle to be able to perform the advanced defensive (and offensive) magic that she had ordered him to learn.

"Harry?" Neville said. "Do you think I should die from falling out a window on the first day of the month, or the second?"

"I'd work your way up to the bigger tragedies," Harry advised him. "Start off a bit smaller... like maybe you'll have your leg cut off, or, I dunno, get trapped in quicksand."

"We're practicing again tonight," Neville said. "And Ron said he wants to learn that quicksand spell."

"See?" Harry said, beaming. "It might even be true!"

Neville laughed. They spent the next hour inventing increasingly unlikely tragedies. Harry could not fully enjoy it; last time around, it had been him and Ron that had faked their way through an assignment. They weren't taking Divination again, but still... it would be nice to have a laugh with his best mate (and brother-in-law) in the common room.

"Harry," Hermione nudged him. She was watching him carefully, and Harry suspected that she knew that his mood was shifting. "I want you to watch something," she said.

"Er," Harry said. He was glad that she did not try to talk about Ron and Ginny and the situation with the Weasleys, but felt like it was an explosion waiting to happen. She had become increasingly upset in the last few weeks, ever since the dragon task and Harry sometimes

thought that she would hex the twins. He glanced over at where Fred and George were sitting, heads together, obviously trying to figure out how to collect their gold from Ludo Bagman. Was she going to jinx them right now?

“Don’t worry,” Hermione rolled her eyes. “I’m not going to do anything rash. But if they say one more thing...”

“At least they’re only talking about me putting my name in the Goblet of Fire,” Harry said quietly. “They aren’t even being mean.” This was perfectly true; Fred and George, though annoyed that Harry had gotten past the age line when they had sprouted beards, seemed to have regained some respect for Harry. Harry thought the scene with the Malfoys in the Top Box had something to do with it. George had broken the months of silence the other day to ask, stiffly, if he’d thought about joining the Quidditch team next year.

Hermione snapped her fingers right in front of her eyes. “Watch that ink bottle over there,” she ordered. She then placed her wand on the table. She held up her own rune, and focused on it. “*Accio* ink!” The small bottle jumped toward her a little, and toppled over.

Harry gaped. “Wandless magic?”

Hermione smiled. “You know it’s possible.”

Of course Harry knew it was possible, but they weren’t to learn even the basics of it until their seventh year NEWT level classes. Harry, who had left after his sixth year to hunt Horcruxes, had never learned it. “So,” he said, “that’s what knowing runes can do? You can learn to use magic without a wand?”

“It’s one of the reasons why runes are important to learn,” Hermione said. “But it’s tremendously difficult. And the more difficult spells are almost impossible. From everything I’ve heard, wandless magic is useful... but only up to a point. You’ve got to really be focusing on it. Frankly, using a wand is so much easier.”

“But if you’re ever without a wand...” Harry let his voice trail away. He began practicing again with renewed vigor. The first few times he

tried it, nothing happened. The headache built again, but he ignored it. The third time he whispered "*Accio* ink," he saw it move.

"Very good, Harry," Hermione said. "But you've got to write the essay now; we're meeting tonight, remember?"

"I really wish I'd taken Ancient Runes," Neville said mournfully.

Hermione shrugged. "Like I said, spells are a lot stronger when you've got your wand with you."

"But still," Neville said. "I reckon it's useful."

Harry ignored the argument for the most part, though he found himself listening to Hermione, and using her words to flesh out his essay. He thought she might suspect what he was doing, because whenever he stared down at it in silence, thinking about what he would write next, she would then tell Neville something else.

"I'm done!" He finally said, so loudly that several first years near him jumped out of their seats.

"And about time," Hermione said, glancing down at her watch. "We were supposed to meet – er – Luna five minutes ago!"

They packed up their bags, and hurried through the portrait hole. Harry, who was always aware of when Ginny was in the room, was glad that she and Ron were somewhere else. Preoccupied though the twins were with their financial problems with Ludo Bagman, they would not have failed to notice all five of them leaving within minutes of each other.

Harry paused for a moment to place the Disillusionment Charm on himself.

"Why do you still do that?" Hermione asked waspishly.

"Habit," Harry shrugged.

Ron, Ginny, and Luna were waiting for them by the time they skidded to a halt, threw open the door, and entered the room. Harry

immediately focused on Ginny, and his eyes narrowed with concern. She was very pale, and her eyes were huge with worry, though he had no idea why. He looked over at Ron and felt his stomach drop. Ron looked just as afraid as Ginny.

"What's wrong?" he said sharply. He broke the enchantment so he would become visible again.

"Nothing," Ginny said shakily. She was lying.

"Is it your parents?" Harry asked. "Have they found out that you and Ron are still hanging out with me?"

"No," Ron said. The tips of his ears were bright red. "It's *nothing*, Harry."

"You're lying!" Harry said incredulously. "You think I can't tell when you're lying? I've known you for twenty years!"

Hermione, Neville, and Luna all looked at each other nervously. Harry's brows slammed together. The looks on their faces told him that whatever was wrong with Ron and Ginny, they knew it too.

"Listen," Ron said when Harry glowered at him. "It isn't anything you need to worry about."

Harry continued to glare at him for a few more moments. He had a strong suspicion that this was about the Weasleys. He glanced at Ginny, and decided that whatever it was, he didn't particularly want to know. Despite the fact that he'd promised himself (repeatedly) to stop worrying about it, they kept cropping up in his thoughts. Like when he'd hexed Malfoy in the corridors for tormenting a few first years, he'd wanted to have a laugh about it with the twins. And when he'd had a huge row with Sirius about breaking into Azkaban, he'd wanted to talk to Arthur and Molly... they would've helped him persuade Sirius that it was the wrong thing to do, it was too dangerous.

"All right," Harry said finally.

Ron looked uncertain, as if he could not believe that Harry would give it a rest. "Good," he said. The silence swelled uncomfortably for a few

moments, and Harry could see that Ron was casting around, trying to think of a way to break it. “Er – good – nice Disillusionment Charm. Why didn’t you use your cloak, though? Just practicing?”

Shit. “Er,” Harry said. He did not know how he could get away from this; he did not want to tell an outright lie to either Ron or Ginny, he felt bad enough for not telling them sooner.

“Harry hasn’t used his cloak all year,” Neville said. Ron and Ginny had not been around him enough in the corridors to know this, which was why they had not noticed it missing. “He’s been using that charm instead.”

“Why?” Ginny asked quietly. “If you have the cloak, why Disillusion yourself?”

Harry was cornered, and he knew it. He took a deep breath. “The cloak... it went missing at the end of last year. I left it on the shore of the lake when Pettigrew and the dementors turned up, and when I went back for it, it wasn’t there.”

“WHAT?” Ron roared. “WHAT’RE YOU TALKING ABOUT, IT WASN’T THERE?”

Hermione, Neville, and Luna all jumped back. They did not understand why this was of such vast importance. Harry couldn’t even look at Ginny.

“It wasn’t there,” Harry repeated.

“*Look at me, Harry Potter,*” Ginny said. She was furious. “When, exactly, were you going to tell us this?”

“He obviously wasn’t going to, Ginny,” Ron’s face was bright red with anger.

“Yes, I was!” Harry said loudly. They both glared at him. “I was, I promise,” he said.

“Right,” Ron said. “Although I bet you were just waiting for us to work it out by ourselves. And I think I know when – when—”

“NO!” Harry yelled. “YOU’VE GOT IT WRONG!”

“THEN EXPLAIN WHY THIS IS THE FIRST I’VE HEARD OF IT!” Ginny screamed at him. “IF YOU WERE ACTUALLY PLANNING ON TELLING US, YOU WOULD’VE DONE IT ALREADY!”

“I was hoping to tell you after I’d found it again,” Harry said fiercely. It wasn’t even fully a lie. He’d planned on looking for it, hoping he’d find it again.

“What are you doing to find it?” Ron asked.

“How are you going to find an invisibility cloak?” Ginny bit off.

“It won’t work correctly for anyone who isn’t a Potter,” Harry said. “You know that—”

“So what were you planning to do?” Ron said scathingly. “Walk around with your wand out, saying ‘*Accio* invisibility cloak’ all the time?”

“No,” Harry glared at him. “I think whoever conjured the Patronus that allowed Pettigrew to escape took it. It only makes sense. When we catch Pettigrew again, I plan on getting him to tell us who helped him. When we figure that out, we’ll figure out who has the cloak.”

“Er,” Neville said. “Anyone care to explain what this is about?”

Harry stared at Ron and Ginny warningly for a moment. “The invisibility cloak was crucial to the... defeat of Voldemort last time.” He was grateful that Ron and Ginny did not refute his words.

“And what if we don’t find it?” Ginny looked at him; she was still angry, but she was also very afraid for him and his safety.

“We will,” Harry promised. The weight of another secret – the fact that the Resurrection Stone had been destroyed by Fiendfyre – was extremely heavy. But he would not, could not tell them. Not until Hermione found a way to help him survive the Killing Curse again.

"You're damn right about that," Ron said. "I don't care if we have to overturn Britain to find it."

"But why is Harry's cloak so important?" Hermione asked. "Can't you just buy another invisibility cloak? I know they're expensive, but if we really need one it's worth it."

"The cloak is special," Harry said. "It doesn't just keep the wearer invisible, it keeps him hidden. It was passed down through my family... only the rightful owner can really use it."

"We're going to find it," Ginny said suddenly. Harry was both surprised and gratified that she came up and put her arm around his waist. He drew her closer. "I don't care what it takes," she murmured for his ears alone.

Harry caught her and Ron exchanging a glance.

"We've decided to forgive you," Ron said after a moment. "But you'd better tell us if something else like this happens in the future."

Harry nodded, not feeling guilty because the Resurrection Stone had been destroyed several years ago. He cocked his head at Ron, wondering why he'd gotten over his anger so quickly. He was certainly grateful for it, but it wasn't like his best mate to forget something like this so quickly.

Before he could mention this, Ron looked away. "Listen... about the Yule Ball," he eyed Hermione hopefully, "you're still coming with me, right?"

She smiled. "I said yes the first time you asked, didn't I?"

Harry snorted at the memory. Ron had rushed up to Hermione in the common room immediately after the Yule Ball had been announced, tripped over his own feet, sprawled on the ground, and had asked her to go to the ball with him. He'd tried not to laugh, he really had, but the fact that everyone else who had witnessed his rather bumbling efforts had been rolling on the floor had been too much. Hermione, who had looked both pleased and bemused, had immediately said yes.

Harry wondered if Hermione knew that her future self and Ron had been married. By the softness in her eyes whenever she looked at Ron – even at his clumsiest – he suspected that she might have guessed.

Ron shrugged, trying – without much success – to look casual. “Thought you might’ve – er – gotten a better offer.”

Harry grinned down at Ginny. She returned it a little weakly.

Hermione raised her eyebrows. “From whom?”

“I dunno,” Ron said. “Viktor Krum, maybe?”

“Viktor Krum?” Hermione said, shocked. “*Really?* I went with Viktor Krum to the Yule Ball last time? *Why?*”

“Ron didn’t notice you were a girl until *after* you’d already accepted Krum’s invitation,” Ginny informed her. Luna laughed.

“But – Krum hasn’t even asked me,” Hermione said. “Not that I’d go with him—”

“Krum’s probably heard all about how you and Ron are going together,” Neville told her. “Ron’s been bragging about it for weeks.”

“Is that why he doesn’t come to the library anymore?” she asked thoughtfully.

“Damn straight,” Ron said darkly.

“Harry,” Ginny said. “We’ve just seen Snape – he’s agreed to give us the Polyjuice Potion so we can go together. I’ll just be disguised as someone else.”

Harry grinned. “Good,” he brushed her lips with a kiss. “If he hadn’t, I wouldn’t have gone at all. Who are you going as?”

“Me,” Luna said dreamily. “I’ll be Ginny and go with Neville.”

“Is this a plan?” Harry said. “I mean – you lot have already thought of this?” He hadn’t heard a word of it. Instead, he’d debated as to

whether or not he should just take Ginny, her family be damned, or whether he should just hide in the common room, and the other three champions could dance around with their dates without him.

"Of course we have," Ginny said.

"First I've heard of it," Ron said at the same time. Neville shook his head.

“Well,” Hermione said. “It’s something us girls have thought about, at any rate. Now that we’ve all gotten into a fight – well, you three did – and decided on our dates for the Yule Ball, can we *please* get to practicing magic?”

H P H P H P H P H P H P H P

It was probably one of the strangest experiences in Harry's life. He whispered that in Ginny's ear before the champions and their dates were to enter the Great Hall. Except... she didn't look like his wife; she looked like Luna. He felt slightly disoriented whenever he glanced at her.

“Let me get this straight,” Ginny said. It was Luna’s mouth talking, but Ginny’s tone of voice and inflection that came out. “Of all the strange things you’ve done – not least of which is *traveling time* – this is the strangest? Me, looking like Luna?”

“You want me to use Polyjuice to turn myself into Ron?” Harry retorted. “Luna’s like a sister to me. Seeing *you* in *her* is driving me barmy.”

Ginny looked slightly revolted. “I see what you mean,” she admitted. “I take it we’ll never... play with Polyjuice Potion?”

Harry gaped at her. “What do you mean *play with Polyjuice Potion*? Do people... do they actually do that?”

She laughed. "Some couples, I think."

“Not us,” Harry said fervently.

“Definitely not,” Ginny said, equally serious.

They had no more chance to continue the discussion, as the doors opened to the Great Hall. Harry watched as Krum and a very pretty, but simpering girl entered first. He looked very surly, and Harry suspected that his date was far less satisfactory than Hermione. Fleur Delacour entered next with her date... it was odd, seeing her with another man besides Bill. He realized, with a jolt, that at this point in his life (at only fourteen), he already knew most of his future sisters-in-law. Cedric and Cho followed next, beaming and holding hands.

“Ready?” Harry asked, offering his arm.

“Of course,” Ginny said, taking it.

They walked in together amidst wild cheering. The students at Hogwarts definitely enjoyed a spectacle. Harry’s eyes found Ron and Hermione, and Neville and Luna. He only faltered a little bit at the oddness of seeing Luna in Ginny. He hoped no one else recognized it, although he rather thought that no one would.

Ron let out a loud whistle, and Ginny laughed.

They made their way through the throng of clapping students to the Head Table. Harry faltered again when he saw the judges: Madame Maxime, Igor Karkaroff, Ludo Bagman, and Albus Dumbledore sat together with... Percy Weasley.

He exchanged wide-eyed looks with Ginny. “I forgot!” he said. How could he possibly have forgotten this? He watched with horror as the other champions and their dates filled the table, leaving only two places next to Percy.

“You’re going to have to sit next to him,” Ginny said in a quiet voice. “I just... I just can’t.”

Harry gritted his teeth, already bracing himself as he made his way to their seats. *Maybe it won’t be bad... remember he didn’t say anything when he saw us hugging... and he probably won’t even see beyond Luna’s face to Ginny...* He took as long as he could; he pulled

Ginny's chair out for her, and exchanged pleasantries with Cedric. Finally, he could no longer avoid it, and he sat down.

"Hello, Luna," Percy said. "Hello, Harry."

"Hi, Percy," Ginny and Harry chorused.

"I'm not going to hex you, Harry," Percy said.

"Er," Harry replied. "Thanks?"

"It is a Ministry occasion, after all," he said pompously. "I've got to uphold appearances."

Harry looked at him; that seemed a bit much, even for Percy. He was smiling, though, and it wasn't one of his fake smiles, either. It was a bit mischievous; it would have been more at home on Fred's or George's face. Percy was teasing him. Harry wondered vaguely when was it, exactly, that the world had turned upside down. Was it the day they'd come back? Later? *Earlier?*

"Glad to hear it," Harry said. "Er – how's the Ministry working out for you? Are you one of the judges now?"

"The Ministry is wonderful," Percy said. "And – no, I'm not a judge. My boss is feeling ill, so he asked me to represent him here tonight. It's actually nice to be back at Hogwarts, although I'm quite pleased to be here as an adult, not a student."

"That's great," Harry said. "You seem to have done really well for yourself if Mr. Crouch is letting you stand in for him."

"I think I've proven myself capable of it," Percy puffed his chest out. "I'm not afraid to back down from hard work, and I expect Mr. Crouch knows that."

"It would seem so," Harry agreed. And because he didn't want Percy to stop talking to him – it felt ridiculously good to talk to a Weasley apart from Ron and Ginny that did not seem to hate him – he added, "what is it you do at the Ministry, precisely?"

Percy embarked on a long-winded explanation of the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Harry listened carefully, and asked pointed questions. A plan began to form in his mind... perhaps it would be Percy who chose to fight with Harry against Voldemort. If he were to join the Order of the Phoenix, he could be extremely useful. Not only could Percy make contacts, but he was sharp, and perhaps he could keep an eye out for traitors in the Ministry itself.

Ginny, beside him, joined in the conversation, and they were halfway through their meal before it dwindled. She pressed her hand on Harry's thigh.

"You're being very friendly," she said. "I thought all the Weasleys hated Harry." It was an odd mixture of Ginny's tone and Luna's bluntness.

Percy flushed bright red. "Well – I – er," he stammered. "I think... well, my sister."

"Yes?" Ginny said sweetly. He glanced at her sharply, and Harry held his breath. Had Percy recognized Ginny after all?

"I don't approve of what happened, not at all," Percy sat up straighter. "But everyone else thinks that Harry – er – you took blatant advantage of her. And I was quite, quite furious at first. Ginny was only twelve, you see."

Harry flushed, and stared down at his half-eaten meal. He suddenly felt mortified. He glared at Ginny out of the corner of his eye. She pretended not to notice, but Harry knew that she was just as aware of him as he was of her. Perhaps it was payback for not telling her about the invisibility cloak...

"I think they both were in error," Percy said finally. "I have tried to tell my family this, but they simply won't listen."

"Harry, didn't you tell me that they think you're going to be another Voldemort?" Ginny asked. Percy squeaked, and dropped his fork.

"They think he might, yes," Percy said once he'd recovered himself. Harry was not really capable of speaking at the moment. "Which is completely ludicrous."

Harry jerked his head around so quickly that his glasses nearly slid off. "You don't believe that, then?"

"Only my parents and Bill and Charlie are afraid of that happening," Percy said. "Fred and George just think you messed around with my sister. And, Harry, it's not like they're dead certain of it. They just think it's a risk."

"But you don't?"

Percy eyed him. "You took a curse for me. That isn't exactly something a dark wizard would do."

Harry would have liked to say more, possibly even confess everything to Percy, but his throat felt very tight. When he could breathe normally again dessert had arrived and the moment seemed to have passed. Ginny fidgeted around and elbowed him.

He looked over at her. "What?"

"Nothing," she whispered. "Didn't mean to, sorry." She withdrew the flask that contained Polyjuice Potion, and took a long drink.

"Not a fan of butterbeer, Luna?" Percy asked.

"Not at official functions," Ginny replied; her voice was so dreamy and like Luna's that Harry grinned. "Nargles like to... you know, infest it. It'll make people act even crazier than normal."

"Not a good plan when this lot"—Harry gestured at the vast crowd of students—"are all together." He made a show of setting his own butterbeer aside. "You're right, Luna," he added.

Percy stared between Harry and Ginny for several uncomfortable moments. Harry started to sweat. *Why can't the dancing start now?*

As if Dumbledore had heard his desperate thoughts, he stood. Harry immediately focused all of his attention on him with a feeling of great relief. He snorted when he remembered how terrified he'd been before when it was Parvati Patil he had taken to the Yule Ball and not Ginny. But that was then, and right now he wanted to escape from Percy.

The first time he had danced with Ginny (at Ron's and Hermione's wedding), they had moved together like they had been born to it. This was long after they'd been as fully intimate as they could, and dancing was something that came almost as naturally as breathing. It had been wonderful, marred though it had been by the fact that Harry had wished that it was their own wedding.

This was not like that. Once they were on the dance floor, Harry felt as awkward as he had dancing with Parvati. He suddenly had two left feet, and he had no idea where to put his hands. He knew where they would be if it was Ginny's real body, but he couldn't ignore the fact that it was Luna's he held so tentatively.

"I'm really quite flattered," Ginny murmured.

"Don't," Harry said. "I'm making a fool of myself." He glanced over and saw Ron laughing at him. Even *Hermione* was laughing at him. He glared at them.

"At least I know you'll never stray," Ginny said.

"You already knew that," he retorted.

"Of course," she said.

He groaned when he stepped on her foot. "I'm sorry!"

"Harry," she said. Luna's blue eyes gazed back at him. "Close your eyes."

"Somehow, I don't think that'll help," he said. But he obeyed her anyway.

She didn't say anything as they muddled through another few steps. She was steering him around, though, since he couldn't see anymore. "Always and always," she finally said. "I promise to love you without reservation – even when I'm in Luna's body. I promise to love and cherish you. I will mourn with you and laugh with you"—Harry started to relax when he realized that she was repeating the wedding vows they had made to each other so long ago on a hill covered in heather—"When you grieve, I will grieve. When you feel joy, I too will feel it."

"I'll grow with you," Harry whispered against her hair. With his eyes closed, and hearing her say those words, he could pretend that Ginny looked the way she ought to. "With my mind, my spirit, and my magic. In all ways, I will walk beside you."

"Through the dark and the light, joy and sorrow," Ginny said. Her voice shook a little, and Harry pulled her closer. "I will comfort you—"

"—cherish you—"

"—and honor and respect you."

"Always and always," they said together.

"Thank you," Harry said when the song ended.

"I think I should have added 'and I'll always save you from making a fool of yourself,'" Ginny added wryly.

"I'll remember that," Harry said. He opened his eyes. She was still looking like Luna (thankfully), but the bright, blazing look was all hers. "Want to keep dancing?" he asked, already whirling her around, in time to the faster tune.

Harry found that for the next little while he did not have to close his eyes at all. Ginny was still Ginny, and the body suddenly didn't matter. He enjoyed himself quite a bit more than he had expected; all he had to do was keep his eyes on her, and nothing else seemed to matter.

"Harry," she finally said, panting a little, when a very fast song ended. "I've got to... you know. Have a drink."

He grinned at her. "You do?"

"Yes," she said. "Unless you want me to suddenly turn back into myself."

"And what if I said," He whispered in her ear, "that we should escape right now and head to the Room of Requirement?"

"I'd say that's the best idea you've had all night," Ginny grinned up at him. "I'll go tell Luna."

Ten minutes later, they were alone. No one had noticed them leave, and the night of revelry and exuberance ensured that their absence would not be noticed. Harry stared intently at Ginny, waiting for her features to change.

"Kiss me, Harry," she smiled at him.

He shook his head. "I have my limits, and kissing you when you look like Luna is way past them."

It seemed to take forever, but gradually her hair went back to its normal deep red, and her eyes darkened to firewhiskey brown. Harry watched the changes intently, intrigued by them, wondering what it was about her that inflamed him so. Her hair, her eyes, her long, slim fingers, the length of her neck, the delicate ears... he finally came to the conclusion that it was all of it together.

"Kiss me, Harry," she said again, and Harry readily obeyed.

Afterward, they lay together in a tangle of limbs. Ginny rested her head on his chest, and he stroked her hair.

"Is it just me," Ginny said huskily, "or does it get harder and harder to stop? Not that this isn't wonderful, but..."

"We still have two hundred and thirty days until you turn fourteen," Harry told her. "Until then, we have to."

She sat up, grinning at him. "You're counting the days?"

"Of course," Harry said.

"For how long?"

"Several years," Harry said.

"Good," she lay back down. "I'm glad I'm not the only one. I've been counting since the day we got back."

And Harry couldn't help but kiss her again... and again... and again, until he'd had enough (for the moment) and felt his eyes grow heavy with a very pleasant sort of exhaustion. He traced patterns on Ginny's back for the joy of it, and to keep himself awake.

"We'd better go soon, bright eyes," he said finally. "We can't stay away from the common room much longer."

"It's only eleven," she said sleepily, after lazily checking her watch. "Let's stay until midnight."

"I'm going to fall asleep," Harry told her.

"I'll keep you awake," Ginny promised. "Not with that... I'm too tired. But I have a question for you."

"All right," he said.

"What happens if we don't find your cloak?" she asked.

"I really think we will, Ginny," Harry said seriously. "And even if we don't... I've been thinking quite a lot about this in the last few days. I think I'm going to have to tell Hermione that I'm a Horcrux."

"Why?"

"Because if we're going to look for other ways for me to beat him," Harry said, "we're definitely going to need Hermione's help."

"What about Dumbledore?"

"His, too," Harry said.

“I want you to promise me something,” Ginny said. “I want you to swear to me right now that you’ll look for another way to survive if we don’t find that cloak.”

“I will,” Harry said.

“I know,” Ginny said. “I just wanted to hear you say it. You know... I’m certain that we’ll find it... or Hermione will be brilliant as usual and find out a cure for the Killing Curse.”

“That sure about it, are you?”

“Yes,” Ginny said. “Because I would’ve come back for you.”

Harry pulled her tight against him, and she embraced him back just as fiercely. No words were needed.

Harry was about to open his mouth to tell her how much he loved her, when a shining Patronus appeared in the room.

“Rookwood is here. Come to my office.” It said with Dumbledore’s voice.

“What the—“ Harry said. He scrambled into motion, and back into his dress robes. Ginny did the same. He performed the Disillusionment Charm on both of them, and they sped out of the room and thundered down the corridor. Within moments, they stood before the gargoyles.

“Pumpkin pasties,” Harry said to it, and it sprung aside.

Ron, Hermione, Neville, and Luna were already there, though it was apparent that they had just arrived. Luna still looked like Ginny, although she had wispy blond streaks in her hair. They stood in his way, and Harry could not see around them.

“How did Rookwood get here?” Harry asked, though he had a good guess.

Ron looked at him. He appeared slightly uneasy, and he stepped aside so Harry could see who else was in the room. Dumbledore stood directly in front of a man, who had apparently been Stunned,

with his wand pointed straight at him. Beside him was Sirius; he was wrapped in a black traveling cloak and looked entirely too pleased with himself.

"I went and got him, of course," Sirius said.

"I told you not to!" Harry said, outraged. "Damn it, Sirius! Do you realize what could have happened to you?"

Sirius raised his eyebrows. "I knew perfectly well. I just did it anyway."

Harry whirled on his friends. "You knew about this! That's why you've been worried all week. I can't believe you didn't tell me!"

"Like you told us about the cloak?" Ron said. "Listen, remember how we forgave you right away? It's your turn, mate."

Harry glared at him. They had gone behind his back to do this. They had obviously collaborated with Sirius, Dumbledore, and probably even Snape; they'd ignored the fact that Harry had wanted to think of another way, a way that would not involve putting his godfather at such terrible risk.

Remus caused a slight diversion by exiting rather suddenly from the Floo.

"Were you in on this too?" Harry narrowed his eyes at him. "Did you know that Sirius was going to *break into Azkaban*?"

"No," Remus said coolly. "Not until a few moments ago, anyway."

Harry moved to stand beside him, glad that he had one ally. He folded his arms and glared at everyone. Everyone except Ginny; he couldn't quite bring himself to do that to her. What they had done and said in the last few hours was still too fresh for him to be angry with her.

Unfortunately, Ron seemed to realize this, so he motioned her forward. "You deal with him."

“Harry,” Ginny said calmly. “I want you to take a good look around this room.”

He did, and felt another stab of anger when he saw Sirius and Rookwood.

“Do you see Sirius?” she asked. “I’m beginning to think you can’t.”

“Of course I can see him,” Harry said.

“Does he look dead? Or like he’s been Kissed?”

“No,” Harry said begrudgingly, knowing where she was going with this. “That doesn’t mean anything, though. He could have—”

“But he didn’t,” Ginny interrupted him impatiently. “He got in, he got out, and now he’s brought Rookwood. You should be thanking him,” she said firmly. “And more – you should thank us, since you didn’t have to brood about it for the last week.”

“Fine,” Harry sighed. “Thank you, Sirius – but if you ever do something like this again I’ll – I’ll—”

“Stammer at me?” Sirius asked. “Harry, if you think I’m not going to do risky things to help you defeat Voldemort, you’re dead wrong. You aren’t in this alone.”

Harry clenched his jaw. “Fine,” he muttered again. “But stay away from veils.”

The door opened again, and Snape strode in. “I’ve got the Veritaserum,” he said. “And I’ve also done the enchantments to make them look as though they are in their beds.”

“Disappointed that I didn’t die?” Sirius asked cheerfully.

“No,” Snape said absently. “You’ve got Rookwood. I didn’t want you to die before you did that.”

Sirius laughed. “If it turns out that he did know of the prophecy,” he pointed out, “I just saved your arse.”

Harry felt grudgingly curious. "How did you manage it?"

"Flew on a broom to Azkaban, transformed, snuck into his cell, and used the Portkey that Dumbledore made to get me back to Grimmauld Place," Sirius said easily, as if there had been nothing to it.

"Why not come straight here?" Harry asked. "Why go to Grimmauld Place?"

"We couldn't be sure exactly when I'd do this," Sirius said. "We thought it best if I took him there first, in case Dumbledore was meeting with someone. I'm actually a little early... I thought I'd have more trouble getting past the guards... the wizards, not the dementors."

"Can we save this chat for later?" Snape said irritably.

"By all means," Sirius gestured.

"Ready?" Dumbledore asked. At Snape's nod, he said "*Ennervate!*"

Rookwood's eyes flew open, and he immediately began to struggle. Harry was brought back to two years prior, when Wormtail had been in this exact same room, and in this exact condition. Rookwood, however, was far weaker than Wormtail had been. The bonds around him were very tight, and his movements feeble. He stopped resisting after moments, and as soon as he had, Snape poured the clear liquid into his mouth.

"What is your name?" Snape asked.

"Augustus Rookwood," he said. "Pureblood follower of the Dark Lord."

"We don't need to listen to that drivel," Sirius said.

"Do you know of the prophecy made about Harry Potter and the Dark Lord?" Snape ignored Sirius.

"Yes," Rookwood said, "all of it."

Harry's entire body relaxed. It was Rookwood. He'd been right. He'd just confessed to it under Veritaserum. He exchanged relieved glances with Ron, and resolved to apologize to Sirius for his reaction.

"The Dark Lord is going to reward me," he said. "Beyond my wildest dreams – and he'll kill you, traitor," he said scathingly to Snape.

"Not," Snape said, "if I kill you first."

"Did you tell anyone else of this?" Dumbledore asked.

"No," Rookwood said, "didn't want to share!"

Rookwood laughed; it was a harsh, whooping sound that sent chills up Harry's spine. This man had played a long, subtle game with the intent to ruin absolutely everything. Yet Harry found himself not wanting to kill him in cold blood.

"Reward me," he said again. "He's going to reward me. I'll be his... best servant... the most loyal..." His eyes closed again, though this time he had not been Stunned.

"I believe we have what we need to know," Dumbledore said. "He did know of the prophecy, and he did not tell anyone."

Harry stared down at Rookwood. He seemed very weak. The dementors had taken almost everything from him, and it had left him almost a hollow shell. Even Sirius had not been quite as afflicted as this... because he had been innocent in a way that Rookwood obviously had not been.

"Dispose of him how you see fit," Harry said finally, looking at Snape, Sirius, Remus, and then Dumbledore. "Kill him if you judge it best, but make sure that he's silenced. If you leave him alive, make sure that what happened here tonight is buried so deep that Voldemort will never find it."

Chapter 21 – Small Steps Forward

“Are you nervous?” Daphne Greengrass asked. She sounded impatient and irritated, as though this was not the first time she had asked. With an effort, Harry pulled himself away from his rather circular thoughts.

“About what?” Harry said blankly. There was no way that she could possibly know that, while disaster had been averted with Rookwood, further questioning had revealed that he had not been the one to be the Bonder in the Unbreakable Vow, nor had he Obliviated Dumbledore and Snape. Which meant that whoever had done it was still out there. But Harry was beginning to think that perhaps it was an ally... but why would an ally perform Memory Charms?

“Oh I don’t know, Harvey,” she said as though speaking to a small child. “The second task is tomorrow, right? And you still are a champion?”

“Didn’t realize Slytherin House even knew there was another champion,” Harry said. “Except when you’re taunting me in the corridors.”

She threw him a disgusted look. “I didn’t realize I’d ever taunted you,” she said coldly. “Do I look like one of Pansy Parkinson’s little sycophants?”

“Er – sorry,” Harry said. “I’m just distracted. Not thinking straight.”

“Don’t let it happen again,” she ordered him.

“I – er – I won’t,” Harry said. Of the many unlikely things that had happened over the course of the last few years, the fact that he had struck up a friendship with Daphne Greengrass was possibly one of the oddest that didn’t involve being a time traveler from the future. She mystified him quite as much as Luna Lovegood once had, though they were completely opposite in nature... except for the fact that both of them were painfully honest. Harry was a little wary of her, not because she was in Slytherin, but because she had no idea what she was going to say next.

“So do you know what you’re doing for the task?” she asked. Her brow was furrowed as she made notes on a piece of parchment, preparing for the spell she was about to set up.

Harry, who had already completed the assignment with an ease that had surprised him a great deal, fiddled with his quill. “I’ve got a good idea,” he said. This was a lie. He pretty much knew exactly what he was going to do: use Gillyweed, get Ginny, and get the hell out of the water. “I’m still hammering out the details.” Also a lie. Hermione had left off searching for the terrible power, and had helped him figure out the fastest way to complete the task. Harry had been the one to find the spell that would give the task an unforgettable finish; he was quite proud of this.

“Don’t you think you ought to know exactly what you’re going to do?” she asked, taking her attention off her work and raising her eyebrows. “It is tomorrow, after all.”

Harry was about to reply, when Professor Octavius swept toward them.

“Quite enough chat,” he said. He looked over Daphne’s notes. “You’re almost there, Miss Greengrass. And – are you done, Mr. Potter?”

Harry nodded quickly. “Yes, sir.”

The professor raised his eyebrow. “Care to demonstrate?”

“Er – all right,” Harry said. He felt reasonably confident that he knew what he was doing. He’d already done it three times, with the same successful result. He had apparently had something of a breakthrough when Hermione had shown him what the Ancient Runes could be used to do. While the translation exercises still challenged him a great deal, he had enough of a theoretical knowledge that each exercise in the class became easier and easier. He supposed it was because of his knowledge of the future, and the maturity that brought.

“And which rune have you chosen?” Professor Octavius asked.

“*Uisghef*,” Harry said promptly.

“Invisibility and disguise?” The professor grinned. “Quite a challenge. I take it you are familiar with the Disillusionment Charm?”

“Yes,” Harry said, although he had stopped Disillusioning himself in the corridors.

“I suppose the fame gets to be a little much?” he said.

“A little,” Harry answered honestly.

“Very well. Show me that you have done this. Take me through the steps; I’d like to ensure that you have a firm grasp on this.”

“All right,” Harry said. He pulled out a two new pieces of parchment, scribbled “My name is Harry Potter” on both. He drew the rune for invisibility on the second. “I did that to create a focus for the charm,” he explained.

Professor Octavius picked up the paper. “It’s a bit crude...”

“I’m not much of an artist,” Harry said dryly.

The other man nodded. “And it’s really about intent. Continue.”

Harry drew his wand and tapped the parchment in front of him, and muttered the Disillusionment Charm. He kept his thoughts focused sharply on both the spell and the rune. He had his eyes closed, so that he could do this: he had memorized the rune, and *uisghef* floated through his mind.

“Well done, Mr. Potter,” Professor Octavius said, handing Harry back the now blank parchment that he had held. “Do you understand the theory of this?”

“Well...” Harry knew it, but he did not know if he could explain it properly. “It’s about intent, like you said, isn’t it? Even though I only pointed at the first parchment, I intended that the writing on the other one turn blank as well. And... the rune helped me focus on it; it was like a brand or something.”

“Impressive that you were able to distinguish the writing from the paper,” Professor Octavius said.

“Er,” Harry looked down at his desk. “There’re a few invisible pieces of parchment lying around...”

“Ten points to Gryffindor,” Professor Octavius said.

“I actually had a question,” Harry said, when he made to walk away. “Can this be done on people? Like... let’s say I wanted to Disillusion myself and Daphne at the same time, would it work?”

“It would,” Professor Octavius confirmed. “But with a charm like that, it would be far simpler to just cast it twice. Now... if it was a plan, and you were Disillusioning many different people at once, then it would probably be more efficient.”

Harry furrowed his brows. “It seems like it could be dead useful to me,” he said, “I’m surprised that Ancient Runes isn’t required to become an Auror.”

Professor Octavius shrugged. “It’s rather more subtle than the spells Aurors generally use,” he said. “Even I – and I love studying Ancient Runes, I always have – won’t pretend that using a wand is far more convenient.”

“I suppose,” Harry said. It gave him something to think about, at least, besides Rookwood. He glanced over at Daphne, and was reminded once more of the second task. He was a bit more nervous than he let on, though not for the reasons she might think.

It wasn’t an accident that Ron, Hermione, Cho, and Gabrielle Delacour had been chosen as the things each champion would miss most. The judges didn’t even choose it; an unbiased magical object – quite like the Goblet of Fire – did. Which meant that there was no way that it would not be Ginny whom he sought tomorrow in the lake. They’d already discussed using Polyjuice Potion as they had at the Yule Ball, but it was too risky. Luna would not have been able to hold Ginny’s disguise for more than a few hours, and they wouldn’t have been able to switch them.

And just how are the Weasleys going to react to that?

Later, much later that night when the rest of their dorm mates were sleeping, Harry, Neville, and Ron crept out of the Gryffindor Tower and toward Dumbledore's office. Hermione and Luna detached themselves from the shadows in the corridor and joined them. Harry noted with some annoyance that they had not turned themselves invisible.

"Someone could see you!" he hissed to the girls.

"No one did," Luna pointed out. "Besides, Ron has that Map."

"Anyone coming?" Harry asked.

There was a long pause. "Sorry," Ron muttered, "forgot you couldn't see me shake my head. It's late enough... I reckon even Filch is asleep."

"You know why he wants to talk to us?" Neville asked.

"Probably about my sister," Ron said. "Though we've just about talked that subject to death. They'll react however they want to, we can't do anything about it."

Harry remained silent, and he was glad that he was invisible because he knew that Hermione was aiming sad looks in his direction. He, however, did not think that Dumbledore had asked them to meet him in his office because of Ginny. He suspected that it might have something to do with Rookwood, and all the questions he had brought up.

He almost didn't notice that they had finally reached the circular stair. It took Ron jabbing him in the back to get him on it. Harry was completely exhausted. Not just physically, but ever since Christmas his mind had felt bent in new directions. It made his head hurt like mad. *I'm not smart enough for this*, he thought. Still, he was glad he was there anyway, despite the fact that he yearned for his four-poster bed.

"Ah," Dumbledore said. "Just in time."

He was not alone: Snape, Sirius, and Remus stood with him, all looking rather grim.

“Hi,” Harry said. “I’m assuming you two didn’t come just to wish me luck on the task?”

“No,” Sirius shook his head.

“Though we will be there tomorrow,” Remus said. “And it’s not like you need luck.”

“That’s what you think,” Harry muttered.

“What’s this about?” Ron asked.

“Manners, Ron,” Hermione murmured. Ron grinned at her, and she flushed bright pink.

“It’s about Rookwood,” Snape said. “Something very interesting happened tonight.”

“What about Rookwood?” Harry asked. “I thought he was – er – out of the picture.” True, Harry had not wanted to know, but he had thought that the Death Eater had been forcibly removed from the game they were playing with the future.

“I wasn’t satisfied with his answers,” Snape said simply. “All the ‘the Dark Lord will reward me’ drivel was, I thought, a way for him to evade questioning.”

“But we used Veritaserum,” Neville said, confused. “He’s supposed to tell the truth!”

“And he did, Longbottom,” Snape said smoothly. “But only a very foolish wizard would become a Death Eater without knowing the effects of the truth potion, and the ways to minimize the damage.”

“We thought it best to continue questioning him,” Sirius said. “We’ve had him at Grimmauld Place. We found out that no other Death Eater knows of it, by the way. Not the fullness of it, which is a good thing – it was one of the few things that he could tell us that we want to know.

Every night we've used the same method of questioning, but last night we tried something a little different—“

“—would that we had thought of it before,” Remus said. He was very pale, though it was nowhere near the full moon. “Sirius borrowed Albus' Pensieve.”

“And I used the Imperius Curse on him to force him to show us how he found out about the prophecy and who told him if he didn't have another Death Eater friend he was scheming with,” Sirius said. “But he couldn't.”

“Let me guess,” Harry said grimly. “Another Memory Charm?”

“No,” Remus said. “He was fighting Sirius' curse until his nose started bleeding. And the moment he relented, and Sirius proved stronger, he died.”

“WHAT?” Ron bellowed.

Harry clenched his fists to prevent himself from destroying Dumbledore's office again. Waves of fury broke over him. *Damn* the Ripple Effect! They weren't supposed to have to deal with mysteries encased in mysteries anymore. Harry was supposed to be able to defeat Voldemort without the heavy price. He should have been able to... he knew about the prophecy, he knew all about the Horcruxes and where they were, he damn well knew that he was a Horcrux.

“What the fuck is going on?” Harry asked through gritted teeth. He looked at Dumbledore, desperately hoping that he had all the answers like he used to. But Dumbledore looked almost as troubled as Harry felt.

“I think it might be time to consider the fact that it might have been an ally,” Remus said.

“AN ALLY?” Harry shouted at him. “HOW COULD IT POSSIBLY HAVE BEEN AN ALLY?”

“Well,” Remus said calmly, “the Death Eater is dead. His secrets – including his full knowledge of the prophecy – have gone to the grave

with him. There is no danger of Voldemort finding out about it from him.”

“We’re quite certain that it was the breaking of an Unbreakable Vow that killed him,” Sirius pointed out. “Nothing else could have done it like that.”

“You didn’t even get the memory, though,” Hermione said. “Isn’t an Unbreakable Vow only broken if the vow is actually broken?”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Ron said to her.

“We don’t know the nature of the vow,” Snape said. “It could easily have been a matter of intent. Or it could have been that he would never allow even the Imperius Curse to force him to tell. We will never know, unless we find out who did this.”

“Who knows about the prophecy?” Hermione asked. “And who knew about it?”

“Everyone in this room,” Dumbledore said. “Ginny Potter, James and Lily Potter, Frank and Alice Longbottom—”

“My parents?” Neville said incredulously. “Why in Merlin’s name would my parents have known?”

“Because the prophecy could have meant you,” Harry said. He’d forgotten that his parents had known about it... known the fullness of it. He ignored Neville’s shocked sputtering, his mind racing. Was it possible that Harry’s mum and dad were mixed up in this? It seemed deeply unlikely, but if Remus was right, and the person who had forced the Death Eater to swear an Unbreakable Vow had been an ally, it might have been... but no. He firmly believed that whoever had done this to Rookwood had also sworn the Unbreakable Vow with Dumbledore and Snape.

“Neville,” Harry said gently. “When did your parents... when did Bellatrix – er – hurt them?”

“N-november, 1981,” Neville stammered.

“Dumbledore?” Harry said. “Do you think that whoever Obliviated you and Snape and was the Bonder in the Unbreakable Vow you made also did this to Rookwood?”

Dumbledore was silent for a long moment. “I think that it is likelier than two separate people doing it.”

“There had to be two people,” Snape pointed out. “The Unbreakable Vow requires three people.”

“You know my thoughts on this,” Dumbledore said. “I still do not believe that the person who Obliviated us was a foe—“

“Why?” Harry said. “Explain it to me again.”

“Because I would have had to be under the Imperius Curse to make that Vow, had I not trusted the Bonder,” Dumbledore said. “And I do not believe that there is a wizard strong enough – not even Tom Riddle – that is capable of it. Not to mention that Severus would have had to be placed under it as well.”

“Do you think it might have been my parents?” Neville asked suddenly.

“Maybe it was Merlin!” Luna said brightly. Harry jumped; he had not thought that she was actually paying attention to the conversation, and the sound of her voice startled him.

“Honestly, Luna,” Hermione rolled her eyes. “Why do you think it was your parents, Neville?”

“Well... everyone says that it was such a big secret,” Neville shrugged. “And if my parents, Harry’s parents, Professor Dumbledore, Professor Snape, and Rookwood were the only ones to know about it... and if whoever did it really were allies... then they’re the most likely guess.”

“They were the Aurors that had the most success rounding up Death Eaters after Voldemort fell,” Remus said slowly. “For less than a month, but didn’t they catch Rookwood?”

“But why would Neville’s mum and dad tell Rookwood the prophecy?” Harry asked. He had a rather large headache brewing behind his right eye.

“It’s possible that something else in that memory would have forced him to break the Vow,” Snape said. “And yes, Lupin, it was the Longbottoms that caught Rookwood. Two weeks after the Dark Lord went into exile.”

“This is impossible,” Harry muttered. “Dumbledore, if you really thought it wasn’t Rookwood, why would you let Sirius go to Azkaban to retrieve him?”

“You seem to be laboring under the misconception that I’m infallible,” Dumbledore said. “I assure you that I make mistakes. I did not stop him from going to Azkaban because I did not want this to be another one. And I am glad that he did so... Rookwood would have told Voldemort the prophecy the moment he was broken out of Azkaban had he been given the chance.”

“What about Neville’s parents?” Harry said. “And I know you aren’t infallible. You’re just not as fallible as the rest of us.”

“I think it is a reasonable guess,” Dumbledore said. “Far more believable than Rookwood being the mastermind.”

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry waited until the Gillyweed took effect before he dove under the icy water. For a few moments, he reveled in the fact that swimming (when he could breathe underwater) felt a lot like flying. His body felt entirely weightless, and he sluiced toward the bottom of the lake almost as quickly as he flew on his Firebolt. *I could get used to this*, he admitted, as he saw Krum, with his shark’s head, out of the corner of his eye.

Further and further he went in the murky green depths. It had an odd sort of beauty. He distantly remembered seeing photographs of the tropics in his Muggle primary class. This lake was nothing like it. There were no brightly colored fish, no sandy bottom. It reminded him a little of a wetter version of the Forbidden Forest. He continued

onward, using the mild propulsion spell that Hermione had taught him. Krum disappeared.

A flash of silver caught his eye. He turned, expecting to see the flash of a mermaid's fin. But it was Fleur, and she was being attacked by Grindylows. He changed course without thinking – he'd have plenty of time, and this was his future sister-in-law, after all.

She was panicking. Her mouth was open wide... he could see it through the Bubble-Head Charm she had used. Tiny, brittle fingers grasped her, pulling her down into the tall weeds that covered the bottom of the lake. Fleur was thrashing around, trying to get away – she had obviously not had as proficient a teacher as Remus Lupin.

"Stupefy!" Harry shouted; bubbles emerged from his mouth, but a red light arced from his wand. *"Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!"*

One by one, the small creatures fell away. Harry tugged on Fleur's arm to pull her out of the weeds. The moment she was completely free of them, he sped away without giving her another look.

He suspected that perhaps twenty minutes had passed since he had entered the lake, and he felt a wave of relief and satisfaction when he saw the merfolk village. As he drew closer, Ginny's hair seemed to guide him to her – the one colorful thing at the bottom of the lake. He ignored the staring merfolk, and aimed a Cutting Hex at the ropes that bound Ginny to the pole. He was very glad that he did not feel compelled to save the rest of them. Gabrielle Delacour, Cho Chang, and a dark-haired older man (Harry assumed that this was Krum's father) could wait to be rescued.

Grinning, Harry did a compass charm that would point him to the edge of the lake where the judges waited. Once he was facing the correct direction, and certain that he gripped Ginny tightly, he said *"Ascendio Maxima!"*

The water roared past his ears. He was moving even faster than he ever had on his Firebolt, and he felt like laughing. He and Ginny cleared the lake within thirty seconds. They shot out of it like a bullet. No sooner had Harry spoken the incantation to get rid of his gills and

return his lungs to normal, than she woke up, clutched him, and began to scream.

Harry laughed; Ginny stopped screaming and joined him. They hit the zenith high above the lake, and began falling toward the shore. "*Leviosa*," he said. And then instead of falling, they were soaring. He could hear shouting from the ground. As soon as he knew roughly where they were about to land, he softened the earth with a Cushioning Charm. The impact sent pebbles and rocks spraying all around, though Harry barely felt it.

"You're a madman, Harry," Ginny said, though she was grinning as widely as he was.

"Don't tell me you didn't enjoy it," Harry told her. She was sopping wet and looked bedraggled, but she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He desperately wanted to kiss her. Instead, he used a Drying Charm to protect her from the chill he was now beginning to feel.

"OUR YOUNGEST CHAMPION, THE FIRST BACK!" Ludo Bagman shouted.

The crowd of adults descended on them. Madam Pomfrey forced Pepper-Up Potion down both their throats, and someone dried Harry off, and wrapped him in a blanket. Harry spared a glance at the judges, and saw that even Karkaroff looked impressed. Though that could possibly have been gas... Ludo Bagman shook his hand energetically. Percy Weasley followed, as well as two redheads who had broken away from the crowd of students.

"Very impressive, Harry," Percy said, also shaking his hand. "Quite the show."

"Thanks," Harry said distractedly; he was looking for Sirius and Remus, who had both said they would be there. He found them a little ways away from the judges' stand, but not as far away as the students. There was a woman with them... a woman with bright pink hair.

Harry gaped, and was so pleased with the sight of Dora Lupin – though she was still Tonks, he supposed – that he did not notice that the Weasley twins had come right up to him.

“You’re not supposed to be past the line,” Percy said.

“Going to tell Mum on us, Perce?” Fred said flippantly.

“Hey, Fred, George,” Harry said distractedly.

“Why was our sister with you?” George asked. He sounded more puzzled than angry.

“George,” Percy said. “I can’t allow you to harass a Triwizard champion.”

“We’re not harassing him!” Fred said indignantly. “George just asked a question. And I’d like to know the answer.”

“She’s the thing I’d miss most,” Harry said honestly. “Listen – can we save this for later? My godfather’s here.”

Without waiting for a reply, he hurried away, skirting past Ludo Bagman, Professor McGonagall, and Madam Pomfrey. It took him several moments to realize that Fred, George, and Percy were following him. But before he could stop and try to shake them more thoroughly, he was nearly tackled to the ground by Hermione, Ron, Neville, and Luna.

“Excellent, mate!” Ron shouted, clearly not noticing his brothers. Ron pounded him on the back.

“Not – so – hard,” Harry gasped, staggering.

“That was brilliant!” Neville said gleefully. “I almost got hit by a rock!”

“I knew you could do it,” Hermione said. “It looked very frightening, though.”

“It was,” Ginny, who had escaped from Madam Pomfrey, said.

“Don’t lie,” Harry grinned at her, “you only screamed for a few seconds. It was a hell of a lot more fun than the dragon.”

“What’s going on here?” Fred asked.

Ginny eyed him coolly. “We’re congratulating our friend on a job well done, Fred. Don’t be a prat.”

“You’re not even supposed to be around him,” George accused. “If Mum knew—”

“But Mum won’t find out, will she? Or I’ll tell her about Katie and Angelina and what you were up to after the ball,” Ginny interrupted him. “I’ve had just about enough of Mum and Dad’s ridiculous restrictions.”

“So have I,” Ron said. They had intentionally moved to stand beside Harry. He suddenly felt several inches taller. The twins looked quite dumbfounded. Percy showed no visible reaction, though Harry thought he might have seen a small smile on his face. He couldn’t be sure.

“Don’t make me reacquaint you with my Bat-Bogey Hex,” Ginny threatened, when the twins set their faces in mutinous lines. “Honestly, Fred, George, you’re being a bit immature, don’t you think? How many times do I have to tell you that it was my fault, not Harry’s?”

“Oh, are we dueling?” Sirius asked pleasantly. Harry turned and saw that he, Remus, and Tonks had joined them. “Is this part of the task?”

“T—” Ron was about to shout, but Ginny kicked him swiftly in the shins before Harry could. Tonks was not a fool, though, and she looked rather taken aback.

“Er – wotcher, ginger,” Tonks said. “Do I know you?”

“Oh – er – no,” Ron said after a moment. “I thought I might’ve though. I thought you were a – a friend of Neville’s Gran’s. *Tilly*, I think her name was?”

"You – er – do kind of look like her," Neville put in. "Except she doesn't have pink hair."

"Harry, this is my cousin Nymphadora Tonks," Sirius said.

"Don't call me Nymphadora, Sirius," Tonks said irritably.

"You let Remus!" Sirius said. Harry, Ron, and Ginny exchanged sly grins.

"Nice to meet you, Tonks," Harry shook her hand, beaming. "Any relative of Sirius' – you know, besides the Death Eaters – is a friend of mine. I think I've heard him talk about you... your mum's Andromeda, right?"

"No Death Eaters in our small twig on the Black family tree," Tonks said. "Mum married a Muggle-born."

"All the more reason for her to be my favorite cousin," Sirius said.

"You seem to have a lot of cousins," George muttered.

"Not as many as you have brothers," Sirius said cheerfully. "No one wants to answer my question? Are we dueling or what?"

Harry watched the twins closely. Their cheeks were a little red, and they shuffled their feet. Every few seconds, they looked at either him, Ron, or Ginny. They seemed to notice that everyone else was willing to fight them – with magic, if need be – if they said anything disparaging. But Harry rather thought that they might not want to. They'd slowly been getting over whatever anger they might have this entire term. Harry hoped that he was witnessing the death of it.

"Definitely not," Percy said. "I am a judge, and I can't allow that to happen."

"Don't you tell Mum, either," Ginny warned.

"I don't make it a habit of telling Mother official Ministry business," Percy replied. Harry had no idea why this conversation was being

classified as 'Official Ministry Business' but he was grateful for it nonetheless.

"So, Harry," Fred said. "Are you going to join the Quidditch team next year?"

"I've thought about it," Harry grinned, recognizing an olive branch when he saw one. "I think I'll go for Seeker."

"And since Wood's gone next year," Ron put in, "I think I'll try for Keeper."

"If they have open tryouts for a Chaser position, I'm going for it," Ginny said.

"Do you even know how to play?" George asked. "We've never let you."

"I've been stealing your brooms and practicing since I was six years old," Ginny replied calmly.

"Isn't amazing how Quidditch just brings people together?" Tonks asked. Hermione giggled.

Harry felt a great sense of happiness that did not abate for several weeks. It had nothing to do with the fact that he had received a nearly perfect score. It had almost been the way it used to be. Fred and George had gradually relaxed, and had gotten into a long, involved discussion about Beater techniques with Sirius. Percy and Remus had discussed various regulations on magical creatures. Remus had also stolen glances at Tonks. He had been able to lay aside the worries over prophecy, and the unknown person who was either friend or foe. Instead of brooding, he had reveled in the fact that he had been surrounded by most of the people he loved most in the world for almost an hour.

"You're still grinning like a madman," Ginny swung her legs over the bench across from him one night at dinner. The second task had occurred several weeks prior, and Harry still felt quite content. Especially since the twins had apparently given up on ensuring that Harry, Ron, and Ginny were kept apart at all times.

"Can't help it," Harry told her. "Not only have the twins relaxed, but I think the teachers have too."

Ginny shrugged. "Mum and Dad said we weren't to be alone together." She made a show of looking at the other Gryffindors. "We're not exactly alone, are we?"

"And that's not the only reason why I'm happy," Harry told her. "*Muffliato!*" he whispered, waving his wand under the table. "Dumbledore didn't give Crouch time to kill his father. As soon as he escaped the house, Dumbledore got him."

"What if Crouch does something, though?" Ginny looked worried.

"I think it'll turn up in the Daily Prophet tomorrow," Harry said, "that Mr. Crouch has been put in St. Mungo's... Dumbledore Confunded him, and everyone thinks he's completely insane. Dumbledore said it wasn't even a problem convincing the Healers that he'd lost his mind."

"Dumbledore went himself? Won't Crouch find that suspicious?"

"He went under Polyjuice Potion," Harry shook his head. "As far as Crouch knows, Dumbledore never left Hogwarts last night."

"And what of Rookwood?" Ginny asked. "Did you find out anything else?"

"Not yet," Harry shook his head. "But you know... I'm inclined to believe Dumbledore. You know that. He made some compelling points. Maybe it wasn't a Death Eater after all..."

"I wish we could find out for sure if it was the Longbottoms," Ginny murmured.

"Dumbledore's working on it," Harry said. "But we're still going ahead with this. We're just going to have to take that risk."

"You mean Snape is going to have to take that risk," Ginny pointed out. "I suppose that's how it's going to have to be, though."

“I wish it wasn’t,” Harry said. “But we’ve had worse odds.”

Chapter 22 – The Best Laid Plans

On the twenty-third of June, Harry found himself walking with Neville toward the greenhouses. There was an air of subtle excitement around the school, and the topic on everyone's lips was the final task. After his rather stunning performance in the lake, Harry was in the lead. He was pleased by this, of course; not because of the accolades, but because he would have a head start in the maze.

Still, Harry found himself almost wishing that he did not know what was going to happen. The knowledge of Voldemort's return was a heavy burden, and it grew heavier with each passing day. So when Neville had asked if he wanted to join him at the greenhouses, Harry had seized the opportunity to escape his own thoughts.

"Hi, Professor Sprout," Neville said when the door to the greenhouse opened. "Need some help with the plants?"

Professor Sprout smiled. "Of course Neville – and Harry's here too? I've some Flaming Roses that need pruning. You can show Harry how to do that."

"Thanks, Professor," Harry and Neville chorused.

Harry had never seen the Flaming Roses. Each year had introduced them to new plants, but they were generally of the more useful but deadly variety. Neville led him to the smaller greenhouse behind Greenhouse Three; Harry suspected that this was where Professor Sprout did her own researches in magical flora. The students never found themselves here.

"What's that vine thing?" Harry asked, pointing at a climbing vine that had blossoms in a dizzying array of colors. The way the colors were arranged, it sort of reminded him of the sky at sunset.

"Sky Vine," Neville said enthusiastically. "They're at sunset right now, but the colors of the blossoms will change to midnight blue – some will even develop white spots that look like stars – and then it'll be sunrise and daytime. It takes about two hours for the process; you might even be able to watch it. It's looking really healthy, too..."

"You really like plants, don't you?" Harry asked, amused.

"Yeah," Neville said. "C'mon, the Flaming Roses are this way..."

The greenhouse was much larger on the inside than on the outside, so much so that Harry was positive that it was under an enchantment. He could not put a name to any of the plants, though the aroma was wonderful. He could not help but stare around in wonder.

"Here they are," Neville said. "Right around the Night-Blooming Gardenias."

When Harry caught sight of the roses, his first thought was of Ginny. They were huge, far larger than any Muggle roses that he had ever seen. They were a bright, rich red that seemed almost too vivid to be real. But that was not the most unique thing about them. Little tongues of flame darted among the petals; they looked like fairies or fireflies. It made him think of Ginny's hair...

"So, how do we do this?" Harry asked when Neville handed him a pair of pruning shears. He eyed the bushes somewhat warily. Beautiful they may be, but they might also be dangerous.

"Just watch me at first," Neville said. "See the blossoms that look a bit fierier than the others? Those are the ones you want to get. Watch."

He cut one of the blossoms nearest to him, and Harry jumped when all the other roses lit up. The head of the rose fell, and Neville swiftly caught it in a glass bucket. "Professor Sprout likes to save them," Neville explained, "and wooden buckets wouldn't hold it. See how it's still burning? They'll burn like that for a month."

Harry watched as Neville cut decisively. When he was satisfied that he could tell which roses needed to be pruned, he joined in. It was satisfying work, and Harry was able to lose himself in it. *Ginny would like these*, he thought. *I'll have to purchase some for her... maybe Professor Sprout would be willing to sell them.*

"Harry," Neville said tentatively. "Was it really – was it really almost me?"

Harry knew exactly what the other boy was asking. "Yes," Harry said. "The prophecy stated that the boy was to be born at the end of July. That could've been you or me. I dunno really why he chose me..."

Neville looked over at him with wide and fearful eyes. "I don't think – I don't think I could've done it. I'm not really... I think I'd be too afraid."

"Is this where you start being insecure again?" Harry asked. "You're helping me. You're preparing to fight with me. When are you going to realize that you were placed in Gryffindor for a damn good reason?"

"When I stop being so scared," Neville said after a moment. Another rose landed in the glass bucket.

"You honestly don't think I'm scared?" Harry said incredulously. "Neville, I'm terrified that I'm going to lose everyone. Yeah, I may not worry too much about Voldemort will do to me, but I'm dead afraid of what he'll do to you and everyone else I love. You saw my boggart!"

"But you're doing it anyway," Neville said. "Again."

"Because I have to," Harry said. "But you and Ginny, Ron, Hermione, and Luna... you're the brave ones. You didn't run away screaming when we told you the truth. This is my destiny, to defeat Voldemort. It isn't yours. You could walk away right now."

Neville stared at him. "You said you needed me."

"I do," Harry said promptly. "I need all the help I can get. But I'm not going to force you into it—"

"You're not forcing me into anything!" Neville said indignantly. "I *want* to help you. I'm going to."

"Did you just hear yourself?" Harry asked. "You know the dangers, right?"

"Yes," Neville said.

"And you think it's worth fighting anyway?" Harry pressed.

"Of course," Neville said. "But I'm still afraid... sometimes I have nightmares."

"I have nightmares practically every night," Harry informed him. "But you haven't given in to them, have you? You're still preparing for a war you don't have to fight in, right? You're afraid, but you aren't going to let that stop you. Neville... if that isn't the definition of courage, I don't know what is."

Having this conversation with Neville had obviously been just what the other boy had needed. Neville had been mostly silent for the rest of the time in the greenhouse, but Harry could tell that it was a thoughtful silence. He watched as Neville took a good look inside himself, and realized that what Harry had told him was true. There was a new light on his face, and a new purpose to his step when they finally left, receiving much gratitude from Professor Sprout as they did so.

But Harry also realized later that Neville had not been the only one to come away from the greenhouse with something. Neville had needed to hear the words, but Harry had needed to say them. The knot in his belly that had grown steadily over the last month had eased a little, and he was not quite so fearful of what may come about due to his actions on the morrow.

Ginny and Hermione noticed this straightaway.

"You boys have fun?" Hermione asked, amused, when Harry and Neville clambered into the common room. Neville was covered in dirt, and his robes were singed. Harry doubted that he looked much better.

"We did," Harry said. "But I think we both need a wash."

Ten minutes later, and feeling much cleaner, Harry rejoined the girls. "Where's Ron?" he asked.

"He's still recovering from the History of Magic exam we had this morning," Hermione said.

"Comfort eating," Ginny added. "How are you doing?"

“Better,” Harry told her. He threw himself in the empty armchair across from her. “And not just because I had a shower. I think I’m ready for the... task tomorrow,” he took a deep breath. “I’m as ready as I can be, at least.”

“*Muffliato!*” Hermione said. “There, we can talk freely. This really is a useful spell, Harry.”

“I wish you didn’t have to do it alone,” Ginny whispered. “I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I,” Hermione said. “This year has flown by, hasn’t it? It seems like it was just yesterday that I was badgering you to tell me everything. And the Yule Ball was last night... and the second task was this morning.”

“Feels that way to me, too,” Harry admitted. “I thought it would last forever; it’s hard to believe that almost four years have gone by since we’ve been back.”

The twins caused a slight diversion by entering the common room in high spirits, and speeding off to their dormitory, after throwing a wave in their direction. Harry waved back. He had a very good idea why they were so happy, and he suspected that the owl from Gringotts carrying a money bag full of galleons (supposedly from Ludo Bagman, making good on his debt) was the reason.

“They’re certainly happy,” Ginny said, amused.

“They finally got their money from Bagman,” Harry said easily. “I’m sure they’re upstairs making plans for a joke shop.”

“From Bagman, eh?” Hermione said dryly. “Are you going to tell them it was you?”

“Not now,” Harry said evasively. “But yes, eventually.”

Ron joined the three of them minutes later, skillfully (and purposefully) set about distracting Harry from what was coming tomorrow. Neville joined in, and Harry, who was willing to not think about it for the remainder of the evening, allowed himself to think of

Quidditch, house-elves, and Zonko's with a great sense of relief. Luna wandered in behind a few first years; the other Gryffindors, so used to having this particular Ravenclaw in their midst, ignored her.

When ten o'clock came and went, Hermione pulled something from her bag. "I got this for you, Harry," she said. "I thought you might need it... it's a Sleep Potion."

Harry, whose nerves still felt frayed around the edges, accepted it gratefully. "Thanks," he said. He immediately drank it.

"Harry, no!" Hermione cried. "You weren't supposed to – you were supposed to wait until you were in bed!"

Harry started to ask her why, but at that moment he felt a wonderful floating sensation. "Ahhh," he said. His eyes suddenly felt quite heavy, and he narrowed them, blinking often. "Thish... ish... nice..."

Someone laughed. "I think he might need some help getting to bed," Ginny said.

Harry wondered if she was offering, but with a mild sinking feeling, he realized that he was simply too tired to give her what she wanted. "Too tired... for that..."

Ron snorted, but it sounded very far away. Harry's ears had obviously been stuffed with cotton. The lights in the common room danced and swirled. He watched them for a while, but there was a sparkling darkness behind his eyes that made it difficult to do.

He found himself lifted bodily off the armchair. He suspected that Ron and Neville were the ones who were half-carrying, half-dragging him to Harry's bed. Harry did not even have the energy to argue with them, to tell them that he could do it himself.

"Good night, Harry," Ginny said.

"Bright eyes," he murmured before he fell asleep between one blink and the next.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry was the first into the maze, by virtue of the fact that he was in the clear lead. Twilight was falling, and it seemed a long time ago that he had walked the grounds with Sirius, Remus, and Tonks. It had only been a few hours since then, but it was the difference between staring at the road he now must tread and actually being on it. Time was dwindling away.

Heart hammering inside his chest, he did the Four-Point Spell, and chose the path that led to the right. He wondered if Crouch would still be patrolling the outside of the maze, ensuring that he did not meet with anything too difficult, but he might have been impressed by the ease with which Harry had passed the first two tasks. He wished he could blast his way through the hedges and head straight for the Cup, but that was impossible. They were enchanted to be more solid than stone walls.

His scar gave a vicious twinge at almost the exact moment a giant acromantula jumped in front of his path. Distracted for a moment by the pain, it was almost upon Harry before he moved. He jerked his wand upward, thinking "*Levicorpus!*" as hard as he could. The spider flew up, clearing the hedges. Harry aimed his wand at the soft underbelly, and yelled "*REDUCTO!*" The spider exploded, spraying smelly bits all over him.

Harry kept his wand out, certain now that Crouch had not underestimated him. He came to the next divergence in the path. He poked his head around the corner, and saw one of Hagrid's Blast-Ended Skrewts. Deciding to use one of the new spells in his arsenal – he did not want to get too close to the stinger – he shouted, "*Zemlata!*" and the magical beast was sucked down into the earth. He waited until the ground stopped churning and shuddering, and continued onward.

He destroyed two other acromantulas, but took several wrong turnings, and found himself back where he had destroyed the Skrewt. Shaking his head with irritation, he did the Four-Point Spell again, and went straight ahead. He could hear other shouts and bangs and knew that he had almost lost his lead. He was running now—

Something reached out and gripped him around the ankle, pulling him toward the hedge. He fell hard, barely managing to keep hold of his wand, and slammed his chin on the ground. Eyes watering from the pain, he twisted around to see what had got hold of him. It was a plant – Devil’s Snare! He sent fire at it, stood up and brushed himself off.

Cedric Diggory came thundering past him, and without a thought, Harry tore off after him. But Cedric’s legs were longer than his, and when he rounded the corner and found another divergence, Harry could not tell which way he had gone.

Fleur screamed somewhere off to the right, and Harry stood rooted on the spot. If Krum was using the Cruciatus Curse on her... shaking his head, he forced himself to ignore it. Cedric could not be allowed to take the Cup...

Hoping that Cedric would be waylaid, Harry ran to the left. Another Blast-Ended Skrewt was swallowed into the earth, and Harry felt the world turn upside down when he sprinted straight through the golden mist.

“SPIDER!” he shouted at the sphinx before she could even open her mouth. She stepped aside. A large scuttling thing with a hundred legs and nasty looking fangs – one of Hagrid’s creatures, Harry thought – met him around the next corner. Harry hit it with a *Sectumsempra* but missed its head.

Harry rolled, but one of the fangs pierced his left arm. *Hope it isn’t poisonous*, Harry thought grimly, before he blew the creature up. He staggered a little when he rose, and his shoulder bled freely. *I really need to learn some healing spells*, Harry thought. He used the Four-Point Spell again. He started to take the left path again, but heard Cedric shouting with pain from the right. Harry checked himself, and tore off, following the cries.

“*Stupefy!*” Harry shouted. Krum immediately fell over. Cedric scrambled to his feet.

“He was using the Cruciatus Curse on me!”

“He was Imperiused,” Harry said shortly.

“I – how do you know?” Cedric asked.

“I saw his eyes,” Harry lied.

Cedric did not believe him. “I can’t believe you’re defending him, Potter,” his face was twisted in an ugly grimace. “Who would have Imperiused him? Fleur’s already out of the maze, I saw the red sparks.”

“Cedric—“ Harry began, but Cedric took off away from him at full speed. Harry chased him, grimly determined that Cedric would not get away from him again. Panic made him move faster than he ever had before in this short, fourteen year old body. “DAMN IT, CEDRIC!” he shouted.

“STAY AWAY FROM ME!” Cedric called over his shoulder.

Harry was still far behind him, but gaining, when he turned a corner. Harry swerved around it and saw—

The Cup was just ahead, and there was no way that Harry could overtake Cedric in time. “*Stupefy!*” Harry bellowed. There was a flash of red light, and Cedric crumpled to the ground. Harry had no time to feel relieved when another giant spider crashed down almost directly on top of him and sent him sprawling, his wand flying a few feet away. Harry felt a flash of pain on his leg, and, ignoring it, Harry dove for his wand.

“*REDUCTO!*” He screamed. And not pausing to watch the spider explode, he hurtled to his feet and ran. Cedric was also on his feet. He was not sprinting as fast as Harry was, but he was closer to the Cup.

“NO!” Harry shouted. He seemed to be flying... He watched with horror as Cedric reached out—

And Harry’s hand grasped the Cup at the same instant as Cedric’s, and they both hurtled away toward the graveyard, to where Cedric might die unless Harry was very quick. He slammed to the ground

beside Cedric, and nearly fainted from the pain in his leg and shoulder. Gasping, he staggered to his feet.

"Touch the Cup, Cedric," Harry said. He pointed his wand at the other boy.

"What the hell is going on?" Cedric asked.

"GET OUT OF HERE!" Harry roared. "TOUCH – THE – EFFING – CUP!"

Cedric looked both confused and furious. "Did you know this was going to happen?"

"YES! NOW GET OUT OF HERE! OR DO YOU WANT TO DIE?"

"You're going to *kill*—"

"*Imperio!*" Harry said. Cedric's eyes glazed over, though Harry immediately knew that Cedric's mind was not nearly as weak as Pettigrew's. Harry broke out into a sweat – Pettigrew was going to join them at any moment... Cedric had to be gone before he even saw that he was there.

Cedric made jerky movements to the Cup. *Take the Cup, take the cup, take the cup*, Harry thought as hard as he could. They had seconds left—

Cedric's hand grasped the handle, and he disappeared.

Harry had no time to be relieved. No sooner had Cedric returned to Hogwarts than he heard the faint sound of Pettigrew making his way toward him. The lunch he had eaten hours before churned in his stomach. Pettigrew's footsteps grew closer... he could see him... he was now only five feet away...

Harry forced himself to remain passive, even though every instinct he had screamed at him to kill this man. He desperately wanted to do it, but the part of his brain that was cold and logical remained in firm control.

This has to happen, this must happen, this has to happen...

The refrain echoed through his brain when Pettigrew took his wand, when he heard Voldemort's high, cold voice, and when he was tied to the stone. *This has to happen, this must happen, this has to happen.* They were saying things, but Harry ignored them. Their voices grated sharply on his nerves, and he clenched his fists until the palms of his hands stung.

Harry forced himself to watch as Pettigrew completed the spell – including cutting off his own hand – and Voldemort returned again. Hatred welled up inside him, but Voldemort was now calling his Death Eaters to him, and Harry must pay close attention... he must make sure that none of them spoke of the prophecy. And if they did, Harry must be prepared.

The Death Eaters Apparated into the graveyard where the bones of Voldemort's father were laid to rest. They were like menacing, black shadows... so subservient to Voldemort that they might as well have been a part of him. Lucius Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Avery, Amycus and Alecto Carrow, Nott, McNair... one by one, they knelt and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robes. Harry watched, wishing he could kill them all right here, right now.

But he could not do anything. So he watched as Voldemort described to his followers how he had survived, how he had waited for them to come to him. Harry listened closely; Voldemort said the exact same thing he had before... the Ripple Effect hadn't changed that much... The Death Eaters were held spellbound, listening as closely as Harry, though they were awestruck, not disgusted.

"And you, Severus," Voldemort said softly. "I confess myself surprised to see you here at all. I thought you long lost to that champion of filth, Albus Dumbledore."

"Never, my Lord," Snape said harshly.

"*Crucio!*" he yelled.

Snape cried out in pain, and writhed on the ground. Harry forced himself to watch – Snape was doing this for Harry's mother. He was

enduring this because he had loved Lily Evans so much, and for so long that he was willing to sacrifice everything to keep Harry safe, and to help Harry defeat Voldemort. The least he could do was watch.

"I have – spied on – Dumbledore," Snape said. "For these long years. For you. My Lord—"

Voldemort raised his wand again, and Harry did the only thing he could do; he tried to push the black rag that Wormtail had shoved in his mouth. His scar burned fiercely, and Voldemort felt a cold rage toward Snape that generally preceded murder. He had no idea what he could say... but he could not allow Snape to die...

He spat and worked at it. Little by little, it wriggled loose; he used his tongue to push it.

"You have thwarted me at every turn, Severus," Voldemort's mild tone belied his black rage. Harry's heart pounded. "It was you who kept a close eye on Quirrell. Do not think my memory so short that I have forgotten. *Crucio!*" Voldemort watched in silence as Snape screamed.

The rag was almost out of his mouth. Harry felt himself panicking... Voldemort was going to kill him, Harry knew it, he felt it through his scar, he was only playing with him now... and then a thought struck him so suddenly that it was almost as if someone had shouted it in his ear. *The article*. Umbridge had written it, Harry knew it. The Death Eaters surely had no idea – Umbridge was not a Death Eater. And Snape was the best of liars...

The rag fell to the ground atop Tom Riddle's disturbed grave.

"SNAPE, YOU FILTHY TRAITOR!" he shouted. "I KNEW IT! I'VE KNOWN IT SINCE I FOUND OUT YOU WROTE THAT ARTICLE! WOULD THAT DUMBLEDORE – WOULD THAT HE HADN'T TRUSTED YOU! I *TOLD* HIM!"

The Death Eaters that stood besides the graves and the yew trees stirred and murmured. Snape kept his head bowed. *Follow my lead, follow my lead*, Harry urged him silently. *Do it, do it, do it.*

“What’s this?” Voldemort hissed.

There was a long pause, while Snape panted. “I knew – I knew that you would return, my Lord. I wrote an article long ago that would serve to turn the Wizarding world against Harry Potter. And they have... just like I planned... Even Dumbledore does not fully trust Potter.”

Harry had the pleasure of seeing Voldemort surprised. “YOU BASTARD!” Harry yelled.

“My Lord,” Lucius Malfoy stepped forward. “I too have had that aim. Harry Potter is considered a menace; the Ministry does not trust him. My son Draco has told me that even the parents of his little friends hate him.”

“I did not know you had Quirrell under your control,” Snape said. “If I had... If I had, you would have returned to power three years ago. I swear it, my Lord. I am your servant. I *hate* Dumbledore. But I have kept myself close to him, as I thought you would wish me to. Forgive me... forgive me for being wrong.”

“Stand up, Severus,” Voldemort said coldly. Harry held his breath. “He is telling the truth,” he said to the watching Death Eaters. “It was good of you to have done this. Unfortunately, it was for naught. Harry Potter will end tonight. His death will be a gift I give myself at my own rebirthing party.”

Think again, Tom Riddle.

“NO!” Harry shouted, mostly because he felt like he had to say something.

Voldemort laughed a high, cold laugh. He gave his full attention now to Harry; he stroked his wand with long, spidery fingers. “No?” he said softly. “Your mother is dead. Your father is dead. There is no one here tonight that would extend himself – or herself – to give you the time of day, let alone die for you.” He flicked his wand, and Harry crashed to the ground. “Give him his wand, Wormtail.”

His wand was jammed into his hand, and he was roughly pulled to his feet by the man who had betrayed his parents. He gathered his thoughts, grimly satisfied that his Obfuscumency shields were tightly in place, as they had been for over a year. Even if Voldemort did something unexpected, Harry's mind would not betray him...

Harry went through the motions of the mock duel. He endured the white-hot pain of the Cruciatus Curse. He stumbled again to his feet.

"Bow," Voldemort said. "The niceties must be observed..."

This time, Harry bowed mockingly. The moment was nearly upon him...

"Watch," Voldemort ordered his Death Eaters. "Watch as I prove that no little boy could match my power."

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Expelliarmus!"

The spells collided in the middle. Harry focused all his attention upon it. The beads of light appeared... and they immediately began to move toward Voldemort's wand. Voldemort was shouting at his Death Eaters to do nothing... Harry's wand jerked and vibrated at the same moment that the first bead of light connected with Voldemort's wand.

Screams of pain – Snape's screams – came out of the wand first. But Harry didn't listen to it – instead he listened to the phoenix song. Even now, it filled him with courage and the strength to keep holding his wand.

The old Muggle, Frank Bryce, squeezed out of the other wand and dropped to the ground. "You show him, boy... killed me, he did. But you'll show him..."

The shadowy figure of a woman toppled out next – Harry thought it was Bertha Jorkins... he watched as she pushed her long hair out of her face, and Harry recognized his mother. She came toward him and said in a low, echoing voice, "We're so proud of you, Harry... you know what to do... wait for your father, he wants to see you..."

James Potter was already getting to his feet. As soon as he was close enough to speak without Voldemort hearing he said, "As soon as you break the connection, Apparate to Godric's Hollow... wait for Sirius there..."

Harry nodded fiercely, accepting this without question. "NOW!" he cried. He broke the connection and the shades of Frank Bryce and his parents flew to Voldemort. Harry spun on the spot and, thinking with all his might of Sirius' kitchen, he Disapparated.

Once the feeling of being pulled through a tube vanished, and he had checked to make sure that he was in Sirius' home at Godric's Hollow, he sank to the floor. His entire body felt weak, and he was shaking uncontrollably. His leg and arm still bled, though it was slowing, and only a few scarlet drops fell to the floor.

"*Accio* towel," Harry said wearily. It zoomed toward him, and he dabbed his leg and arm with it. He was almost too tired to think straight. He wanted to go back to Hogwarts... to let Dumbledore know that Voldemort had indeed returned. He must have sat for ten minutes or maybe even half an hour, debating whether or not he should return. But his father had said—

CRACK!

"Good, you're here," Snape said. He was very pale and shaking; he looked how Harry felt. Harry thought it might have been due to the Cruciatus Curse. He knelt down, pulled the towel from Harry's limp grasp, and used his wand to heal Harry's wounds. "It would have looked very suspicious if you had Apparated near Hogwarts."

"Thanks," Harry said quietly.

"Don't thank me," Snape said. "It's not even remotely difficult to heal minor cuts."

Harry raised his brows. "I didn't mean the healing."

"You saved my life," Snape said. "Although I do not know if that mad plan of yours will hold. You are certain that it was Umbridge that wrote the article?"

“Yes,” Harry said. “He was going to kill you. I had to do something. I’m just glad you went along with it.”

“You would have lost a spy,” Snape said. “The Dark Lord – after your disappearance – dispatched me to return to Hogwarts with all haste. I believe he is not as displeased with me as he was... he believes that he can use the wide distrust against you to his advantage.”

“I know,” Harry said. His scar – and the Horcrux inside him – had sensed the cunning beneath the rage. “And...” he suddenly felt very uncomfortable. “I didn’t do it because I was afraid of losing a spy, Snape. I – er – I know why you turned against him, you know. You – er – loved *her* more than you hated *him*. That means something to me.”

Snape did not answer, though Harry was grateful that he did not fly into a rage as he had when Harry had once viewed his worst memories without permission. “I have to leave,” Snape said finally. “I judge it best that you remain here for the time being, until we figure out a way to get you back without it seeming like you did magic beyond your years. I will tell Dumbledore where you are.”

Harry nodded, though he had planned to listen to his father and wait for Sirius to come to him. Without another word, Snape Disapparated with a loud *pop*; and Harry was alone once more. Harry wandered out of the kitchen and into the sitting room. The house that Sirius had bought with the Ministry’s blood money was far larger than his parents’ house, yet it was still a home. Harry felt safer here than he did even at Hogwarts; no one could come here unless he trusted them.

He threw himself down on the couch, yawning, though he resolved to stay awake. But the minutes ticked by. Snape surely had had enough time to tell Dumbledore where he was... why was it taking them so long to figure it out? As time passed... one hour... two hours... three hours... their silence became more and more ominous.

It was long after midnight, and Harry was restlessly pacing the floor. The wait was almost unbearable. His feet itched to turn on the spot and take him to Hogwarts where he could swiftly find the answers he

sought. But his father's warning echoed in his ears, and he forced himself to stay put.

Harry cried out when Dumbledore's Patronus resolved itself into a phoenix.

"Do not come to Hogwarts. You will be arrested. Ministry watching."

Chapter 23 – Interlude: Albus Dumbledore II

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

Meanwhile, back at the castle...

Albus Dumbledore knew something was dreadfully wrong the moment Cedric Diggory appeared at the entrance to the maze clutching the Cup. He felt remarkably as he had when Harry Potter had been gone for hours as he was attempting to rescue his wife from the fangs of the basilisk and – more dangerous – the clutches of Tom Riddle's diary. It was identical, except for the fact that it happened in an instant; it was not process that took hours. Cedric appeared, and Albus knew that what was about to happen would change everything.

He stood up. The Hogwarts students were cheering wildly for the Hufflepuff champion. Even some of the Beauxbatons students bestirred themselves to applaud. Five students, however, had noticed exactly what he had. Ginny Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom, and Luna Lovegood – a formidable group – immediately began to confer with one another. When Ginny looked over at him, he shook his head. *No, I do not know what is happening. No, I do not know what is about to happen.*

Cornelius Fudge shoved past him; Albus did not think the Minister had been deliberately rude. He was only showing his exuberance. Cedric stood, swaying a little, and as Albus drew near him, he saw that his eyes were vacant and glazed. He could easily imagine what had happened; the effects of the Imperius Curse were not difficult to see for one who had Albus' skill.

"Mr. Diggory! Congratulations on winning the Triwizard Tournament!" Cornelius said jovially. He extended his hand in Cedric's direction, but Cedric did not take it. "Er – Mr. Diggory?"

Amos Diggory, his wife, and Cho Chang were the first wave of well-wishers to reach Cedric after the Minister and Albus himself. Albus thought of Obliviating Cedric, but had to discard the idea. There were

too many people around, and it would look far too suspicious. *I'm sorry, Harry.*

"He Imperiused me," Cedric whispered. Then, louder, "Potter Imperiused me!"

"What – how – what?" Amos stammered. "Harry Potter used the Imperius Curse against you, son?"

"He did!" Cedric said insistently. Albus noted with dread that the crowd had gone silent.

Cornelius stood there, gaping. "Are you certain of this?"

"I know what being put under the Imperius Curse feels like," Cedric said sharply. "This Cup," he said, "was a Portkey. I was about to grab it, when Potter grabbed it too."

Albus closed his eyes, thinking rather quickly. "We will wait to hear your full story later, Mr. Diggory. For now – see Madam Pomfrey. Alastor!" he said to Barty Crouch, who stood a little ways behind him. "Search the maze. Try to find Potter; if he is there, he may be under his invisibility cloak."

Crouch immediately obeyed. One obstacle out of the way. Amos and his wife pulled Cedric away to where Poppy was already working on Fleur Delacour, who was suffering the effects of the Cruciatus Curse. Albus turned to the stands, and sought Sirius. He was already on the grass; Remus and Nymphadora Tonks were with him.

"Sirius Black," he said. "If Harry Potter is, indeed, not on the grounds of Hogwarts, do you have any idea where he might be?"

He had full faith in Sirius Black. He was sharp-witted, and he knew well enough that he was expected to play along. He would not like it, but he would do it. The only worry was Nymphadora. He glanced at Remus, and the other man drew her to the side and out of earshot. It was not a permanent solution; she would need to be told the truth.

"I might know a few places," Sirius said.

“Go look for him,” Albus said for the benefit of those in the stands who listened. He was thankful that the Minister had gone after Cedric rather than forcing Albus to take drastic measures. “Once everyone has seen you leave,” Albus said, “double back. Sirius – you must kill Barty Crouch. Make it look like an accident. Use fire.”

Sirius paled considerably, but he nodded. He spun on his heel and walked away toward the gates, looking for all the world as though he were about to Apparate away, find his godson, and bring him back for questioning.

Viktor Krum chose that moment to come stumbling out of the maze. Albus strode over to him. “Did you come across Harry Potter in the maze?” he asked. “Do you know where he is? Where did you see him last?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I vos Stunned, I think.” There was a large cut over his right eye that bled freely. He wiped it absently with his robes. “Vot has happened?”

“Come with me to Madam Pomfrey,” Albus murmured.

The hospital tent was as mad as Albus had expected. Cornelius was wringing his hands; Amos was shouting, though Albus could not make out what exactly he was saying. Cedric said over and over again that Harry Potter had Imperiused him.

Cedric stiffened immediately when he saw Krum. “And *he* put the Cruciatus Curse on me! Potter said he was Imperiused, though – Potter probably Imperiused him too!”

“YOU USED THE TORTURE CURSE ON MY BOY?” Amos Diggory shouted; his wife gave a loud sob. He drew his wand and pointed it at Krum, face livid.

“Hold, Amos,” Albus said. “We must get to the bottom of this. Mr. Diggory, would you be willing to give us your memories of what happened this night?”—*Forgive me, Harry*—“I know that you have suffered an ordeal. But we must know what happened.”

Cedric nodded jerkily. Albus pitied him. He was a good boy, brave and kind; he had no idea that Harry had saved him from certain death this night. Albus raised the Elder Wand. "*Accio Pensieve!*" he said.

"Excellent thinking, Dumbledore," Cornelius said.

Albus did not think that merited a reply. He waited patiently for his Pensieve to appear; he was just as anxious to find out what had happened as the rest of the witches and wizards in the tent were, though for very different reasons. He knew exactly where this was going. Harry would be accused of placing the Imperius Curse upon Cedric; Albus had little doubt that he had, in fact, done so. But it might be possible to minimize the damage. Once Voldemort was revealed, and the real Alastor Moody came back from the supposed dead, the memories of this night would be an instrument of truth.

The Pensieve zoomed into the room, and landed gracefully on a small table. "Ah," Albus said. "Cedric, you need to keep the memory of these events fixed firmly in your mind. Place your wand at your temple, and pull it out."

Cedric did so, and the memory swirled in the silver basin like wind made liquid.

"I'd like to see this for myself," Amos said, drawing himself up to his full height. His cheeks were ruddier than normal; he was flushed with anger.

"That is your right," Cornelius said.

Albus led the way into the memory; Cornelius, Amos, and Mrs. Diggory followed. Mrs. Diggory screamed as they came upon the scene of Krum torturing her son. Albus watched carefully. He saw Harry round the corner, and sent a Stunning Spell at Krum, knocking him to the ground.

"He couldn't possibly have seen Krum's eyes," Cornelius said. "He wasn't at the correct angle."

"Mr. Krum was indeed under the Imperius Curse," Albus murmured.

“Potter probably did it himself,” Amos said. “That’s how he knew.”

The scene carried them through. Albus watched as Harry Stunned Cedric, and was immediately attacked by one of Hagrid’s acromantulas. He could not help but feel a fierce pride when he saw how quick Harry was to recover, and how quickly he moved to intercept Cedric. Albus had often been told that he had looked much the same – fierce and determined – when he had dueled, when he had been trying to prevent death.

The scene shifted abruptly to the graveyard. It was no uglier than he had expected, for which Albus was grateful. He ignored the murmurs and shouts of the others who had accompanied him to view Cedric’s memory. He kept one eye on Harry and Cedric, and one eye ensuring that Pettigrew had not seen Harry use the Imperius Curse to save Cedric’s life. What Voldemort would use with that knowledge, Albus did not know. He only knew that he felt a great sense of relief when it became obvious that the confrontation between the two champions was private.

He took a moment to compose his thoughts as the others left the memory.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” Amos said. “Potter has turned into a dark wizard – I can’t say I’m surprised. Whoever wrote that article about him and the prophecy was damn smart, if you ask me. Gave us a warning, it did.”

“We’re lucky he didn’t kill Cedric! He threatened to, I heard him!” Mrs. Diggory sobbed.

“Indeed,” Albus said.

“What do you think he means to do in that graveyard, Albus?” Cornelius asked.

“As to that, I have no idea,” Albus said. “Though I will make every effort to find out, I assure you. I think we must assume, however, that Potter is intelligent enough to know that he will be arrested the moment he returns to Hogwarts. His actions lead me to believe that he did not intend to.”

"I'll alert the Aurors that they are to stop looking for Rookwood and Pettigrew," Cornelius said, exactly as Albus had expected him to. "They are to look for Potter around the clock – Scrimgeour and Shacklebolt are very capable, Amos. We will not let the boy who used an Unforgivable Curse on your son to go free."

"Cornelius, if I may... I think it would be wise to set a guard, day and night, on the door to the Department of Mysteries," Albus said. "I believe Potter will attempt to get hold of it..."

"Done," Cornelius said. "I will also alert my Senior Undersecretary to begin the proceedings for a trial. I want everyone there who has ever attempted to warn us about Potter: Gilderoy Lockhart, Lucius Malfoy... everyone. If we haven't caught him within the month – and I have no doubt that we will, Amos, do not worry – then he will be tried in absentia."

"A wise course," Albus murmured. He could not prevent this from happening anymore than he could move the sun from its course across the sky.

Cornelius stalked out of the tent, muttering imprecations. Albus followed, certain that the Minister would now attempt to settle the nerves of the restless, dumbfounded crowd in the stands. He stood to the left and slightly behind the Minister.

"*Sonorous!*" Cornelius said. "Harry Potter is guilty of using the Imperius Curse on Cedric Diggory and Viktor Krum."

The Minister's voice was loud and it echoed strangely. There were gasps and cries from the stands. Albus heard a shuffling from behind him and a whisper saying "*Muffliato!*"

"It's done," Sirius said; Albus heard him clearly over the empty promises Cornelius Fudge was now making. "What do I do now?"

"Take Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom," Albus said. "You will find the real Alastor Moody in the—"

"Trunk," Sirius said. "Yeah, I know."

“Liberate him and take him to the Room of Requirement – as soon as Severus returns, I will send him to you. He can heal him,” Albus said.

“Why take Dora, though?”

“Because you’re going to tell her everything. And if Alastor is awake and alert enough, you’re going to tell him as well,” Albus told him firmly. “They need to know – tonight. You must also know that we – especially you – must appear to fully believe the Minister. No, do not argue. Harry will be going into hiding; he will need as many people as possibly to be able to move freely.”

“I don’t like it,” Sirius said.

“I hate it,” Albus said. “Sirius, I am certain that this is what he would wish us to do. It is necessary. Horrible, but necessary.”

“I hope you’re right,” Sirius said. He walked away.

The students filed away back to their common rooms as they had been bidden to do. Albus stared at Harry’s wife and friends, willing them to be smart. If they weren’t, Albus would need to send them into hiding along with Harry. It was a possibility that it would happen anyway – in fact, it was almost certain that Ron and Ginny would join Harry. But it would not be wise to do this too soon. He would need to speak to them as soon as possible; he would like to break away now, but he knew that Cornelius would expect him to help.

“Cornelius,” he said. “Alert the Aurors; get Scrimgeour and Shackbolt here. Do you have ways of instant communication?”

“Er – I could Apparate to the Ministry,” Cornelius said.

Albus shook his head. “They need to be here immediately. I have devised a way of using a Patronus to send a message. If you would like me to...?”

“Do as you see best, Dumbledore,” Cornelius said. The look on his face told Albus quite plainly that Cornelius trusted him fully, and was ready to give over control of the situation to him. *Excellent.*

He sent his Patronus. They waited in silence for twenty minutes before Kingsley Shacklebolt and Rufus Scrimgeour came thundering toward them, not even out of breath despite the run from the gates. Albus looked over at the maze, knowing that he appeared to be deep in thought.

“Alastor has been in there for a long time,” he said quietly. “Too long, I think.”

Cornelius did not need another hint. “Go find Alastor Moody,” he ordered sharply. “I’ll explain everything once you’ve returned with him. Albus, you don’t think anything’s happened to him, do you?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Albus lied. “Still. He should have come out by now.”

Sirius must have caught up with Barty Crouch rather quickly, for Shacklebolt and Scrimgeour returned, levitating his badly burned body, within five minutes. Cornelius gaped at it.

“What do you – you don’t think – is Potter still in the maze?” Cornelius asked.

“It was an accident, Minister,” Shacklebolt said in his slow, deep voice. He was obviously deeply saddened. Rufus Scrimgeour, on the other hand, appeared entirely indifferent. “We found a Stunned beast near his – his body.”

“What did you mean about Potter?” Scrimgeour asked roughly.

This opened a conversation that lasted well into the night. Albus contributed as often as he could, though he mainly watched Kingsley Shacklebolt. Harry trusted him fully, and Albus began to understand that the trust was not given lightly. While Cornelius and Scrimgeour were quick to fire off suggestions and theories, each more unlikely than the last, Shacklebolt was more thoughtful.

Severus interrupted the discussion shortly after they arrived at Albus’s office. Albus glanced at him sharply: he was pale, shaken, but looked otherwise unharmed.

“Are the rumors true?” he asked. “Is Potter guilty of using the Imperius Curse?”

“Absolutely,” Cornelius said. “And he used it on Viktor Krum as well, and forced him to use the Cruciatus Curse on Mr. Diggory and Miss Delacour.”

Severus’ face twisted with hatred. “I knew something like this would happen... I tried to warn you, Dumbledore – Potter’s been crossing lines since the moment he got to Hogwarts. It was only a matter of time before *this* happened.”

“I prefer to believe that a man is innocent until proven guilty,” Albus murmured. He heard the message behind the words: Severus confirmed that Voldemort had returned. He suspected that Harry had escaped, but he wished to know. “Do you have any thoughts to offer, Severus? You have been his professor for four years.”

“I suggest you let Black look for him,” Severus said. “Potter will trust Black. And Black might have a better idea than any of us as to where he’s gone.”

“Already done,” Albus said. So Harry was either at Sirius’ home in Godric’s Hollow or at Grimmauld Place; Albus suspected the former. “Very well, Severus. That is all that is *required* of you...” *Take the hint, Severus; go to the Room of Requirement.* Severus met his eyes and nodded swiftly.

“Now, gentlemen,” Cornelius said, once Severus had departed. “Where were we?”

It was not until after midnight that Albus finally said goodnight to his guests. He was weary, and though he had accomplished much he still had quite a bit left to do. He allowed himself a brief moment to pause before he sent his Patronus to find Harry. “Tell Harry Potter ‘Do not come to Hogwarts. You will be arrested. Ministry watching.’”

When he arrived at the Room of Requirement, he found himself in the middle of a row.

“You can’t possibly go, Mad-Eye,” Tonks said. “Look at you – you haven’t even recovered yet. You can barely stand!”

“That’s none of your concern,” Alastor growled. Albus was pleased to note that he was standing up (though swaying a bit) and leaning heavily against a heavy oak cane. “The Ministry will swarm all over the place before tomorrow morning.”

“Professor Dumbledore, *reason* with him,” Tonks turned to Albus with a pleading look.

“I must confess that I do not know what the debate is about,” Albus said. “And it is high time that you called me ‘Albus,’ Nymphadora.”

“I’ll call you ‘Albus’ when you call me ‘Tonks,’” she muttered. “Mad-Eye wants to leave a will.”

“If I’m to play dead,” Alastor scowled, “then I don’t want to leave everything to that nephew of mine. By the time I come back, he’ll have gone through everything I have. I’m going to leave everything to Tonks – the Order will need funding, and my account at Gringott’s is healthy.”

“Excellent thinking, Alastor,” Albus said.

“I’m going to go to my place,” he said stubbornly. “Leave my will out. No one will think twice of it – it isn’t a secret that Tonks here was my favorite at the Ministry. Even You-Know-Who’s spies at the Ministry won’t think anything of it.”

“Albus...” Tonks whispered; she clutched Remus’ hand. “Is it really true? Did Harry, Ron, and Ginny really come back in time to save us all?”

“He did,” Sirius confirmed. “They did.”

“The Ministry should be licking the hem of his robes,” Alastor said. “Fools, the lot of them. Ah well. I take it they were easy to manipulate?”

“I, for one,” Severus said before Albus could reply, “am very much looking forward to the day that the Ministry licks his robes. Even if he is a Potter.”

“Indeed,” Albus said. “They have agreed to set up a watch on the prophecy. They took me at my word that Harry would go after it. It will make it that much harder for Voldemort to get his hands on it. And the Order of the Phoenix simply does not have enough people; we could not have done it ourselves. Alastor – could you not write out the will and allow one of the others to take it.”

“I think even you would find it difficult to get past my wards, Albus,” Alastor said. “You’d get through ‘em, but you’d be in a world of pain.”

“You can’t be seen,” Remus said. “If you’re seen—“

“I’ve been at this before you were born, boy,” Alastor barked. “I don’t need a lecture from you about constant vigilance!”

Albus hid his smile. “How about if I go with you? Would that be a fair compromise, Alastor? I believe that we have a great many things to discuss.”

That ended the argument, though Alastor still appeared mutinous. Albus knew that he was feeling a bit humiliated that he had been under the power of a Death Eater for so long. But Albus could not reassure him that it was through no fault and no lack of ability of his own. That would only serve to hurt the other man’s pride even more than it already had.

“Stay here,” Albus said. “I know you wish to go to Harry, but it would be better if we all went together. This will not take us long.”

The Room of Requirement opened a door to a passageway that led to Albus’ brother’s pub. Though Aberforth did not know the secret, he had already been warned that there may be strange comings and goings in the Hog’s Head Inn. This last blood relation of his would not betray them, nor would he comment on it. Albus stared at Ariana’s portrait for a moment. He could hear loud voices – Aberforth was doing a brisk trade tonight.

He tapped the Elder Wand on Mad-Eye's head and then his own. They quietly walked down the stairs. The pub was full of a wide assortment of visitors including, Albus saw, two Death Eaters. He ignored them and strode out the door. "You are, I trust, capable of Disapparating without splinching yourself?"

"Yes," Alastor growled. Albus turned on the spot, thinking of the quiet street and Alastor's home. Albus kept the Elder Wand out; he did not believe that the Death Eaters would come here. Crouch's death was not yet known to the public. They would come later, if at all. Still, it never hurt to be cautious.

Alastor stumped toward his house, his wooden leg making a clanking sound that seemed oddly loud. "Damn thing. At least that Sirius Black had the presence of mind to get my eye from that scum and replace it with a fake. And he even got my wand."

"Yes, Sirius does indeed know what he is doing," Albus agreed. Once they were through the wards and inside the house, Albus took the Disillusionment Charm off himself. "I must admit that you are far calmer than I was when Harry and Ron Weasley came to me with their tale."

Alastor riffled through the desk in his study, and pulled out a piece of parchment. Not even bothering to sit, he scribbled out his will. "I think we're damn lucky, is all," he finally said. "We've got a powerful advantage. It'll be tough, but I think we can do it. I admit that after ten months of captivity in my own trunk, I'd like nothing better to see You-Know-Who defeated."

"I am truly sorry, Alastor, that we could not find a way to free you," Albus said quietly. "You will find that Harry deeply regrets your confinement as well."

"It was needful," Alastor shrugged. "From where I'm standing, you made the right choice." He put the parchment upon which he had written his will in a small drawer. He then put a slight Compelling Charm – one so subtle that the Ministry officials who visited would not notice it – on it to ensure that it was found.

"How do you think Potter will react?"

“I do not know,” Albus said. “Let’s find out, shall we?”

At ten past two in the morning, the adult members of the Order of the Phoenix filed silently into the Albus’ office, safely Disillusioned. “The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix,” Albus told Tonks and Alastor, “is located at Number 12 Grimmauld Place.”

“Potter isn’t at the noble house of Black,” Phineas Nigellus Black’s portrait said. “I’ve already checked.”

“Thank you, Phineas,” Albus murmured. He raised his wand, ready to send another Patronus message. “Tell Harry Potter ‘Come to Grimmauld Place. Wait five minutes.’” He looked around. “Very well, let’s go.”

“What of Ginny and the others?” Sirius asked. “Shouldn’t they come too?”

“They should, yes,” Albus said. “But I am afraid that taking them from their beds would be unwise. We will speak to them as soon as possible, I assure you – but for now, I am certain that Harry would like to have some answers.”

Albus went first. One by one they entered the dark basement kitchen at Grimmauld Place. He raised his wand and lit the torches, giving it a homier feel.

“Kreacher!” Sirius called. The house-elf immediately appeared. He bowed low.

“Yes, Master Sirius?”

“Would you mind getting us some food and drinks? And after that... a room needs to be prepared for Alastor Moody.”

Kreacher bowed low again. “Of course, Master.”

They all sat at the table. Kreacher had promptly brought out enough bottles of butterbeer for a small army and a lone bottle of firewhiskey. Albus opened a butterbeer and took a long sip, and his stomach

reminded him that he had not eaten since lunch. He was glad that Sirius had the foresight to ask the elf to prepare a meal.

The flames in the hearth made a whooshing sound, and Harry appeared. Albus eyed him; he looked weary and slightly apprehensive, but he was relatively in one piece, though he had not bothered to change out of his bloody robes.

“It was the Imperius Curse wasn’t it?” Harry said immediately. “It was stupid – stupid, but I couldn’t just let him die, could I? I suppose I’m—”

Harry gaped when he saw Alastor and Tonks, sitting around the table looking quite unsurprised to see him. Albus was pleased to see that he was not so affected by the events of the night that he was unable to smile.

“I take it you told them?” Harry asked.

“I judged it best,” Albus said.

“They did choose, Harry,” Remus said. “I must admit that we were going to tell them anyway, but Tonks immediately began asking questions. She did not believe that you would do such a thing without a good reason. And once Mad-Eye woke up, he suspected Voldemort’s hand in his captivity.”

“Good,” Harry nodded. “And thank you both. It was actually part of the plan that the two of you be told if not tonight then soon after. You and the W – anyway, I’m glad that you know. Moody, I’m so sorry that—”

“I already told Dumbledore that it was for the best,” Alastor said.

“Still,” Harry said. “So what’s happened?”

Albus told him. In truth, Harry did not seem especially surprised. But he also had had several hours to think of what had occurred. He had obviously not spent the time in idleness. Albus was pleasantly surprised by this. Harry was a very strong person, but the fact that he was now on the run from the Ministry had to be a heavy weight. He bore it well.

“What happened to Barty Crouch?”

“He’s dead,” Sirius said.

“Won’t that just dig the hole I’m in with the Ministry deeper?”

“The Ministry believes that it was an accident,” Sirius said. “His body was found burned, and there was one of those mad creatures that Hagrid bred at the scene.”

“He was still under the Polyjuice Potion, then?” Harry asked. “So everyone will think that Moody’s dead? Is this a good thing?”

“A dead man can do things that a living man can’t,” Alastor replied. “I’m not planning on hiding out, if that’s what you think.”

“I’m not either,” Harry said. “Not entirely. We will have to be careful, though.”

“I will maintain a large supply of Polyjuice Potion for your use,” Severus said.

“I have to admit, Harry, that I’m a little surprised to see that you haven’t drowned yourself in firewhiskey again,” Sirius reached over and ruffled Harry’s hair. “After the way we met, I figured we’d find you screaming at Voldemort again. I think I would have done.”

Harry snorted. “I considered it. When I heard about the Ministry, your liquor cabinet started to look a little tempting. I’m not cracking up, though, not like I was after I was kicked out of the Burrow. A part of me thinks that this isn’t even such a bad thing. I’ll certainly have more freedom than I would have at school next year.”

“I think you may be right,” Albus said.

“Besides,” Harry added, and Albus noted that his eyes shone a little. “My mum told me that she was proud of me. And I’ll be damned if I don’t continue to make her proud. Always and always.”

Authors Note:

Book Four, she is finished! I've been waiting so, so long to get into book five... I'm sitting here grinning like a fool. The rest of you are probably not, as book four ends on a sort of dark note. Yes, Harry has been accused (rightfully) of using the Imperius Curse on Cedric and everyone is also certain that he used it on Krum as well.

This chapter, though a smidge smaller than the others, was difficult to write. Probably just as difficult as 'Small Steps Forward' and 'Interrogations,' though for different reasons. I hope that I made it clear that Dumbledore made a difficult choice... he did not want to appear to turn his back on Harry. But he had his hands tied. What could he say to convince them? He couldn't reveal prior knowledge, and he couldn't appear to condone the use of the Imperius Curse.

They're also playing a rather different game, though it's changed a bit. You will find out how, exactly, it has changed soon enough.

Also, a reviewer asked why Harry didn't just Banish the Cup, and force Cedric to take it. Frankly, he didn't think of it (and whispers neither did I!), and this sort of had to happen, so...

I do not know when the next update will be. Possibly on Tuesday, as tomorrow is my birthday! I will likely be doing things like celebrating and opening presents. If you wish to give extra gifts, reactions to this story are always appreciated. :D

One last thing: Nyeshet, why, why, why don't you leave a way for me to reply to your reviews?

Chapter 24 – Undesirable Number One

HARRY POTTER SENTENCED TO AZKABAN

Author's Note:

This marks the first chapter that has truly adult content. It's at the end, so if you don't want to read it, pay attention to the bold warning. Also, I'm sorry that this has taken longer than I expected. I rather spontaneously quit smoking late Sunday night, and I've been in full blown withdrawal ever since. This does not make writing easier, and I'm feeling pretty stupid and muddled. And twitchy. And if it seems pretty confusing, I'm trying to give Harry a good attitude about being in hiding, but I'm currently in bitch-from-hell mode. Alas... more difficulties. But here it is!

Harry knew about the outcome of his trial before anyone could tell him because his scar pulsed, and he felt a quivering flash of happiness. As he was dueling Mad-Eye Moody at the time (and losing badly), he rightfully attributed this to Voldemort. He held up his hand to end the duel.

"No time to rest, Potter!" Mad-Eye said. "I told you we'd be practicing as much as we can while we're hiding from the Ministry."

"Give me a moment," Harry said. "I just got sentenced to Azkaban."

Moody's mouth sagged open. He looked around the room, obviously searching for a Patronus of some kind, and then stared at Harry. "Just this moment?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "Voldemort told me."

"Er—"

"When he tried to kill me, he transferred some of his powers to me," Harry said carefully. "Didn't I – they – tell you this? It's why I can speak Parseltongue, and why I can sometimes feel what he's feeling... if it's a particularly strong emotion."

"You can read You-Know-Who's mind?"

“Not really,” Harry shrugged. “Just his emotions. Sometimes I’ll have visions though, of what he’s doing. And that’s not very comfortable, let me tell you. If you ever doubt that Voldemort is the most evil bastard who ever walked the earth, just come find me. I’ll set you straight.”

“Let’s ask Kreacher for a spot of tea, shall we?” Moody said after a long silence.

Harry followed him out of Sirius’ mother’s bedroom (which Dumbledore had turned into a dueling room, with Sirius’ wholehearted approval), down two flights of stairs, and into the kitchen. Kreacher was humming (though it sounded more like he was croaking) a tune and preparing dinner. Harry automatically reached for cups and a kettle, but had his hand swatted away by magic.

“If Master Harry needs anything, he must ask Kreacher,” the house-elf said reproachfully. “Kreacher is here to help. Master Harry has other things to worry about.”

“You’re right about that,” Moody growled. He stumped over to the table, sat down, and propped his wooden leg up on an empty chair. “We’d like some tea, if you wouldn’t mind, Kreacher.”

“Kreacher is happy to serve,” Kreacher said.

“I have to say that you’ve taken to confinement very well,” Moody said. “I’m wondering if you’re not an explosion waiting to happen.”

Harry examined his feelings, as he had for nearly every day for the last month. He had not expected himself to be pleased with his situation... yet he was. Frankly, the Ministry could sod off, for all he cared. Being sentenced to Azkaban was something he had expected since he got Dumbledore’s Patronus; he’d only needed a moment to adjust. He took a sip of tea.

“I’m not,” he said. “I can deal with the manhunt, actually. At the height of the anti-Harry Potter sentiment, the Ministry was offering one million galleons for my capture. I’ve already dealt with this before.”

“Dumbledore tells me you used to have friends that you don’t have now,” Moody said. “That bothering you?”

Harry felt a flash of bitterness when he thought of the Weasleys. He closed his eyes against it, and the rune that had haunted him since the end of his third year was apparently painted on the backs of his eyelids. He opened them again. “It does,” Harry answered honestly. “But I refuse to let it affect what we’re trying to do. Actually, the Weasleys that worry me the most are Ginny and Ron. I can’t imagine why they haven’t shown up by now.”

“You sure they haven’t turned on you?”

Harry snorted. “Trust me. That is one thing that they would never, ever do. You’ll find out when you meet them. I’ve been amazingly lucky with my friends – both this time and last time – and you’ll find out why.”

“I’ll believe you for now, Potter,” Moody said. “But don’t bottle it in. If you’re feeling down, let me know and we’ll go find some Death Eaters to take down.”

Harry laughed. The idea was a good one... he did want to rustle up a few of Voldemort’s supporters. But he didn’t want to make any moves like that until Ron and Ginny had joined him. *Where are they?* “That’ll have to wait,” he told Moody. “Besides... taking out Lockhart will be just as fun as taking out Death Eaters. I’m thinking of taking pictures and exposing his gross incompetence... thought I’d send it to *Witch Weekly*. I might even give them a quote...”

“And we’re still waiting for the others to do that?”

“Just another week,” Harry said. “We can’t afford to wait any longer than that; if Lockhart is going to cause trouble, he’s going to do it once the news hits the *Prophet* tomorrow.”

Harry thought of the plan they had made, and felt such bliss about it that he could not stop the broad smile from spreading across his face. It was perfect, in all ways but one. They should have done this much sooner. Ron had been right... but in the aftermath of his exile from the Burrow, and finding Sirius, all of them had forgotten. He thought

of how it was the perfect revenge for being Obliviated, and his grin grew even wider.

“Care to share what’s so funny?” Moody asked.

“Lots of things, actually,” Harry said. “Imagining Lockhart’s comeuppance... the fact that the Ministry of Magic is compiled of so many morons that they have no idea that they’re working with us...”

“I’ve always said they were a bunch of boobies,” Moody said.

Startled by the slang, Harry threw back his head and laughed. It felt good, laughing did. This was one of the reasons why he had not begun feeling resentful and angry with the rest of the Wizarding world. The fact that Dumbledore could so skillfully manipulate the Ministry to further their aims... the fact that he now had Tonks and Moody on his side... even the fact that he did not have to go back to school and face Umbridge, but could instead take an active role in the war... He felt like he had a talisman in his chest, guarding against feelings of ill-use.

Moody then did something that surprised Harry a great deal. He opened his mouth, and a chuckle escaped. The chuckle turned into a belly laugh. Harry did not think he had ever seen Moody let loose before, and it only made Harry laugh harder.

“Bloody... boobies...” Harry gasped.

“I can’t wait to see their faces,” Moody said. “Every last one of them. Especially Fudge’s, that fool.”

“Do you think they’ve gone mad?” Tonks asked. She sounded greatly amused.

“If that’s madness, I want some,” Sirius said.

“Hey, everyone,” Harry said. He threw a casual glance toward the door. Everyone except Snape – who was currently dancing attendance on Voldemort – crowded around the threshold, as though afraid of entering. Honestly, he didn’t know why they continued to think that he was going to fly off the handle. Did they really think that

he hadn't expected this to happen? "We're just talking about the mass stupidity of the Ministry. Voldemort's back and they're immediately trying to eff everything up."

"I'll be surprised if no one figures it out," Sirius said. "Voldemort is on the move and those at the Ministry who have anything between their ears—"

"Precious few of them, you mean," Moody said.

"—will notice that something isn't quite right," Sirius said.

Harry asked. He chortled again. "I don't think we have to worry about the boobies at the Ministry figuring out that Voldemort's back. Not until we're good and ready to let them know, that is."

"Aren't you at all curious about the trial?" Remus asked. "You do remember that it was today, yes?"

"Potter already knows," Moody said. "Said You-Know-Who told him."

"He was very happy about something," Harry explained. "I thought it must be because of the trial. So is it life in Azkaban, or am I to be Kissed straight away?"

"Life in Azkaban," Sirius said. "Mostly because you're still underage, we think."

"Well?" Harry said. "Tell me everything."

Harry listened carefully as Dumbledore told him of how Cedric Diggory and Viktor Krum had testified. Fleur Delacour had as well, though her statements were not as damning as Cedric's and Krum's. He wondered about that; was it possible that she remembered that he had helped her escape the Grindylows during the second task?

"—and Augusta Longbottom and Xenophilius Lovegood defended you," Sirius said. "I was ready to stand up and applaud, honestly. I didn't, though. Mustn't let them think I don't hate you."

“They did?” Harry said blankly. He remembered vaguely that Neville’s Gran had believed Harry and Dumbledore last time when they had tried to tell the world that Voldemort had returned. And Luna and her father had believed as well. But this was quite, quite unexpected. He wondered if Neville and Luna had told them anything... but no, they wouldn’t. “Why were they witnesses, though?”

“They weren’t,” Remus said. “They interrupted the proceedings. Xeno did it first, and then Augusta did. I believe they’re being questioned – don’t look like that, Harry, the Ministry won’t torture them.”

“How d’you know?” Harry asked.

“Because they are still playing by the rules,” Dumbledore said. “I made sure of that before I departed. I reminded them that a difference in opinion does not make someone a public enemy or a threat.”

Harry nodded. He may not trust the methods that the Ministry employed, but he did trust Dumbledore. He would have to find some way to warn Neville, Luna, and Hermione that they could not be openly supportive of him, and neither could their parents. He wasn’t worried about Mr. and Mrs. Granger – they were Muggles, after all. But the Ministry could very well decide (once they reached advanced states of paranoia) that Mrs. Longbottom and Mr. Lovegood were in collusion with Harry.

Dumbledore (with the help of the others) told him every last detail. Except for one.

“I spoke to the Weasleys,” Sirius said. “They said—”

“No,” Harry held up his hand. “I don’t want to know what they said. I can guess well enough; I don’t want to hear it.”

Everyone besides Dumbledore exchanged uncomfortable glances. Dumbledore certainly was aware of the situation; the look in his eye was so full of compassion that Harry had to look away. Harry did not want to have to think about the fact that sometimes he woke up wishing that he had the closest thing he’d ever had to a family again.

It didn't help that at those times the image of the rune was so bright that he could almost see it with his eyes open.

"You will be interested to know," Dumbledore said after a long, awkward pause, "that Gilderoy Lockhart has petitioned to have a hearing before the Wizengamot."

"Is that normal?" Harry said blankly. "What – he's going to turn himself in?"

"No," Dumbledore said. "I believe he is going to attempt to take advantage of your... unpopularity, and attempt to be rewarded or compensated for what happened in the Chamber of Secrets. The function of the Wizengamot is not only to judge but also to reward, you know."

"You know him," Sirius put in. "He only wants recognition; he's a very greedy boy."

"And did the Wizengamot agree?"

"We did," Dumbledore said. "His hearing will be in three days."

"Ron and Ginny had better get here soon," Harry murmured. "Otherwise we'll have to do it without them. This changes things, though," he grinned, "and makes our lives a hell of a lot easier."

Harry expected that the *Daily Prophet* would give Harry's trial front page status; he was rather notorious, after all. He simply did not expect it to be in the *Evening Prophet*, and when the delivery owl flew in an open window, and Harry saw his own face blinking up from a photo taken by Rita Skeeter last year. "They must've really hustled this one through," he said, raising his eyebrows. Harry did the honors of reading it out loud.

HARRY POTTER SENTENCED TO AZKABAN!

By Aggie Lafferty

Today, on July the 21st, Harry Potter was convicted of using the Imperius Curse against Triwizard Champion, Cedric Diggory and

international Quidditch player, Viktor Krum. He is also guilty of using the Cruciatus Curse (through Mr. Krum) on Fleur Delacour and Cedric Diggory. Courtroom Ten was filled to the brim with witches and wizards from all over the country. The evidence was undeniable, and the Wizengamot came back with the verdict after only minutes of deliberation.

That is not to say that the Wizarding world is able to breathe freely. Harry Potter, Dark Wizard, is still at large, despite the best efforts of the Aurors. Even private citizens are doing their best to find Potter, though the Ministry warns that Potter is extremely dangerous and it best left to the Aurors. Sirius Black, who was wrongfully convicted of crimes and sentenced to Azkaban, however, has stated that he is doing his best to keep a look out for Potter. "I never thought I would see the day that my godson went against everything his parents stood for. James and Lily are surely turning over in their graves."—

"Nice touch, Sirius," Harry said. "I'm actually really impressed – I'll bet you just won over loads of people who might still be suspicious of you..."

"Remus told me what to say," Sirius shrugged. Harry laughed. "Well... not entirely. He told me to say the 'turning over in the grave' bit. You don't think it was too much?"

"Nah," Harry said. "It'll charm all the witches. Poor Sirius Black... so abused... yet so noble..."

Albus Dumbledore, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, is also deeply involved in the ongoing search for Potter. "I have increased the amount of protection Hogwarts has to offer, to the fullest extent of my capabilities," he assures parents. "If Potter returns, I will know it."

"Yeah, you'll know it," Harry said. "And you won't tell anyone about it, either."

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed. "But I thought it wise not to mention that. Incidentally, the wards are extremely strong. If you do need to come to Hogwarts, make sure that you go through Aberforth's pub; Aurors

are already being stationed there, and I can't trust that they won't find out about the other secret passages."

"You told Aberforth?" Harry furrowed his brow.

"Not the details," Dumbledore said. "But he knows that Voldemort has returned and that I am working to help you defeat him. He will not say a thing. Sturgis Podmore, Dedalus Diggle, and Hestia Jones likewise know – do not worry, Harry, I do not intend to tell them your secret. But we need as many allies as we can get, do you not agree?"

"What about Kingsley Shacklebolt, then?" Harry asked.

"Kingsley is another matter entirely," Dumbledore said. "I've recalled the original, living members of the Order of the Phoenix. Kingsley was not a part of that. It is my hope that we can get him on our side, but it would be exceedingly dangerous to approach him with this at the moment. I could not even begin to guess what he might do. He might listen... but there is a chance that he could go to Scrimgeour and Fudge."

Harry sighed and continued to read.

Potter has been named Undesirable Number One, bumping Peter Pettigrew and Augustus Rookwood, escapees from Azkaban, down the list. The Daily Prophet wonders, however, if these two escapes are related to Potter. It is well known that Potter was indeed the one to catch Pettigrew; though there is no conclusive proof, it is not unlikely. When asked about this, Rufus Scrimgeour, Head of the Auror Department, told us: "It is something that we are revisiting. There is no denying that Potter has a connection with both. He caught Pettigrew, and Augustus Rookwood worked for the Department of Mysteries, and his work involved prophecies."

"I'm Undesirable Number One again!" Harry said. "Ron's going to shit himself when he sees this... at least there is no way to connect me to Pettigrew and Rookwood. They never did work out how either of them made it out of Azkaban."

The Ministry has deduced that Potter will perhaps make an attempt to retrieve the prophecy. He is the only one alive who can do so without

going insane. Therefore, the door to the Department of Mysteries is heavily guarded. "Let him come for it," Minister Cornelius Fudge said. "Then we'll catch him and throw him in Azkaban."

Remarkable though this may sound, Potter is not friendless. Augusta Longbottom and Xenophilius Lovegood stubbornly denied the fact that Potter used the Imperius Curse against Cedric Diggory and Viktor Krum. They drew on the fact that Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood are great friends with Potter. "After what happened to his parents, my grandson would never ally himself with a dark wizard. I believe there has been some mistake," she stated after the proceedings. Xenophilius Lovegood was heard saying similar things, though he was not available for comment. While it may be true that their loyalty to their progeny is what inspired this, they are at this moment being questioned about Potter's whereabouts.

Lucius Malfoy, head of the prominent Malfoy family, has a darker thought. "Strong witches and wizards have been led astray before," he said. "I wouldn't doubt that Potter has enchanted them to believe he is innocent." He has a compelling point, which I am sure the Ministry will explore.

"Can you believe how stupid they are?" Sirius asked. "Lucius Malfoy is one of the most senior Death Eaters... surely other people have realized that he bought his way out of Azkaban?"

"Galleons erase everything," Remus said. "You know that, Sirius. Merlin knows the Blacks knew that lesson better than anyone."

Sirius grimaced. "Don't remind me."

The Ministry will also be issuing pamphlets. They will be guides to helping you and your family protect themselves. Albus Dumbledore will be writing it himself, so the Daily Prophet urges you to take it very seriously.

Harry raised his eyebrows. "That's a damn good idea. Last time the pamphlets didn't go out until after Voldemort was unmasked, and they were rubbish. With you writing them, they might actually be useful."

“I hope so,” Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling. “I will attempt to live up to your exacting standards.”

Harry tapped his chin, pretending to be thoughtful. “I think I have a way that you could – what did you say? Live up to my exacting standards?”

“Oh?”

“Firewhiskey,” Harry said. “Not – I don’t want to get drunk. But I think we all need a bit of warmth, and liquor is the way to manufacture it. And when I drink alone, I apparently start screaming at Voldemort... probably not the best idea.”

“Kreacher!” Sirius called; Kreacher, who had made himself scarce upon the entry of the other members of the Order of the Phoenix, immediately appeared in the kitchen. “Would you mind going over to Godric’s Hollow and getting a few bottles of firewhiskey? I think... no more than three.”

Harry stared at him. “Three? I didn’t really plan on drinking that much...”

“You may not,” Sirius said, shrugging. “But I do. You have no idea how difficult it is to act like I’ve turned my back on you, Harry.”

“It’s a horrible feeling,” Remus added. Tonks nodded her head; her hair had shifted in color from a bright, shocking pink, to a blue that was almost black. Apparently this was supposed to convey somberness.

“Besides,” Sirius said. “Your father would like the idea of his best mates getting drunk with his son.”

“My mum probably wouldn’t, though,” Harry pointed out.

“We’ll just hope that she isn’t watching,” Sirius said.

The last time Harry had tasted firewhiskey had been one of the most gut-wrenching experiences of his life – not as bad as the aftermath of

the final battle, of course, but it was awful in a different way. This time it was different. It was more relaxed... and he was not alone.

"I think we ought to make a toast," Tonks piped up unexpectedly. "I know we've already started, but..." her voice trailed away.

"A fine idea," Remus smiled at her. Harry hid his own smile; he caught Sirius' eyes and mouthed "I give them four months before they're together." Sirius shook his head, and replied, still silent "Remus has that furry little problem – it'll take him at least six months to get over it." Harry held up ten fingers for ten galleons and quirked his brow. Sirius made the thumbs-up sign.

"I'll do it," Dumbledore said. He raised his glass and looked at Harry. "To the Boy Who Lived."

Harry rolled his eyes, and drank it down anyway. He lazily flicked his wand and the others' glasses filled to the brim once more.

Sirius grinned wickedly. "To Undesirable Number One, may Ginny always and always disagree."

Harry choked on his firewhiskey and gasped, his eyes streaming. Remus snorted, and Tonks laughed. Even Dumbledore and Moody chuckled a little. He looked around the table and wished they were there.

After the toasts, they settled into the type of comfort (even Moody and Tonks) that generally bespoke of long time friends. Harry sipped his firewhiskey slowly and looked around at them all. Dumbledore, brave and cunning. Moody, wary and vigilant. Sirius' easy grin hid a keen mind... Remus' quiet air did the same. Tonks was loyal and had a heart as big as Britain. He could easily name the names of those who were not here; but he did not need to. These were the best of his allies (of the adults).

Sirius, Remus, and Tonks became steadily fuzzier as the night wore on. Dumbledore had gone back to Hogwarts, and Moody had drifted off, saying that he'd allow the 'young set' to have fun. Harry wasn't entirely sober, but he was also not transfiguring himself, as Tonks had done, into a tall, buxom lady who had obviously been some kind

of sensation in the Wizarding world. Everyone else at the table seemed to recognize her. Nor was he dancing a wizard two step (that involved levitating the other person two feet after every turn and spinning her around like a top), as Remus was doing. Nor was he singing along with Sirius, who could not carry a tune. He was, however, laughing so hard that tears streamed down his face.

“Your father was the one who forced us into learning how to dance,” Remus said. His face was red from the drink, and he was beaming. “Remember, Sirius?”

“How could I forget?” Sirius grinned. “I lost my virginity to the instructor.”

Remus gaped at him. “You’re kidding? So did I!”

Harry roared with laughter. Sirius and Remus gaped at each other, and then at Harry, who was now wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his robes. Tonks lost control of shape, and sat down on her chair. Hard. “I can’t believe you two nutters lost it to the same witch!”

“What did my dad say?” Harry asked. He tipped his chair back so that it balanced on two legs.

“He was trying to do damage control,” Sirius replied. “He had two left feet – he was great on the Quidditch Pitch, but on a dance floor? We were all rather glad that we’d learned *Episkey*, because James would have been in even worse trouble if he’d—”

CRACK! Ginny appeared. Before Harry could say or do anything, there was another *CRACK* and Ron too arrived.

Harry was so surprised by the Apparation of Ron and Ginny that he toppled over backward and landed on the clean floor. It knocked the wind out of him; and as he lay there he noticed several things. The first of which (the most important) was that both of them looked extremely angry and annoyed. He hoped this had nothing to do with him; if Ginny was mad at him, it would take coaxing for him to be able to kiss her. The second was that neither one of them had brought anything but the robes on their backs. Harry narrowed his eyes. They weren’t planning to stay?

“Are you drinking?” Ron said, and his tone was one of disbelief.

“Ron, my good man!” Sirius said.

Ron and Ginny exchanged glances; Harry could not read what might be the purpose of this silent communication. They looked almost unsure of their welcome.

“So,” Ginny said. “We’ve left the Burrow. We’re not going back, and that’s final.”

“What took you so long?” Harry asked. “It’s been a month!”

Ron gaped at him. Ginny narrowed her eyes. Again, they exchanged looks. “You mean,” Ron said in a strangled voice, “that you’ve been waiting for us to join you? Harry, what the hell’s going on? Why aren’t you brooding or, or – angry that we couldn’t take it anymore and joined you in hiding? Aren’t you supposed to be doing the hero thing and pushing everyone else away because you’ve decided to go it alone?”

Harry considered that. He probably should get up off the floor, but he found to his own surprise that he was a bit fuzzier than he initially thought. “No,” he said finally.

A small warm hand grasped his and pulled him up. “No?” Ginny said. “Don’t tell me you’ve finally learned that lesson.”

“Actually,” Harry said. “I figured that just because the Ministry’s a bunch of boobies, doesn’t mean that I should just let Voldemort roam free.”

Ron laughed, though he still looked tense and shaken. “Boobies?”

“Mad-Eye taught him that word, we think,” Tonks said. “He’s been saying it all night.”

Harry furrowed his brow and looked directly into Ginny’s bright brown eyes. He did not like how they were drawn a bit at the corners, nor the unusual brightness. “Did you really think I didn’t want you here? Really? And anyway, we’re not really in hiding. I mean, we are, but

we aren't going to stay cooped up here. Now that you two have joined us... we're going after Lockhart."

Ron smiled. "Finally."

Harry sat down in his chair and pulled Ginny onto his lap. He kissed the side of her head and murmured, "I've missed you. Why didn't you come sooner?"

"We didn't know if that would mess things up," Ron explained. "We thought you might want us, I dunno, at Hogwarts next year or something with Hermione, Neville, and Luna. Since we had no way of communicating with any of you, we thought it best to wait out the summer."

"Then what brings you here now?" Sirius asked.

Ron and Ginny stiffened and exchanged another weighted look. Harry was pretty certain that they'd had at least two reasons for leaving the Burrow: their mother and their father. Fuzzy though he might be, both of them looked frayed and ragged around the edges. Harry gritted his teeth, and a little bubble of anger popped in his belly.

"They had a row with their parents," Harry told Sirius, Remus, and Tonks. "I'm guessing it was about me," he turned to look at Ron and Ginny again. "I don't want to know the details. I really, really don't."

Ginny looked relieved. "We didn't want to tell you."

"Can we have some of that firewhiskey?" Ron asked.

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Lockhart lived in a rather large and lavish townhouse on a fashionable street in London. Tonks had told them that a number of younger witches and wizards lived in this area; generally, they were the hard-partying type with little to offer the rest of the world. Harry was completely unsurprised that Lockhart had found himself here, though he had to wonder how many people had to have been Obliviated before he could afford a place like this.

Mad-Eye Moody, disguised as a distinguished older gentleman with a smooth, unscarred face, Apparated right behind Ron, Harry, and Ginny. He immediately strode back and forth around the wrought iron fence. He appeared to find what he'd been looking for; he knelt down, drew his wand, and tapped a stone. "I've got the wards," he growled. "If you three aren't out in a half and hour—"

"Don't worry, Mad-Eye," Ron said comfortably. "Lockhart hasn't got a chance. He's about as useless as they come; if we're in longer than half an hour, it's because we're laughing too hard to move."

Harry, Ron, and Ginny were not disguised with Polyjuice Potion or by the complex art of human transfiguration. This was part of the plan. Harry patted the pocket in his robes, checking to make absolute certain that the two bottles of potions Snape had made for them were still there. He could not help but grin. As soon as they were on the front stoop, Harry erected a shield that kept the door hidden from both Muggles and wizards. It was rudimentary and hastily done, but it would have to do.

Ginny pointed her wand, and blasted the door of its hinges. Harry and Ron exchanged grins. This had been a long time in coming. While Lockhart could not do much worse damage than Harry had already done for now, he could still be a threat when the truth of Voldemort's return was revealed. It was a slim chance; mostly they were doing this for personal revenge. And Harry had to admit to himself that it felt pretty good.

They did not even bother to hide themselves. This mission actually had more to do with Harry making a public appearance than humiliating Lockhart. According to Snape, Voldemort was beginning to think that Harry was dead.

Squeals and panicked movements came from upstairs. Harry climbed the stairs, followed by Ron and Ginny. Lockhart was trying to Apparate, but he could not. Moody was holding him with an anti-Apparation Jinx. Ron snorted, and Harry sent him a sideways grin.

"Professor Lockhart," Ron called. "Come out, come out. We want to talk to you!"

“GO AWAY!” Lockhart screamed. His voice sounded muffled, even through the door.

“Think he’s hiding under the bed?” Harry asked.

“Let’s find out,” Ginny said. She did not blow the door up, but opened it with a simple “*Alohamora!*” Lockhart was, indeed, hiding under the bed. He was trying to be quiet, but whimpers kept escaping from him.

Ron raised his wand, and caused the heavy, four-poster bed with lavender bedclothes to slam against the opposite wall. Lockhart lay facedown with his hands over his head. He only wore a nightshirt, and Harry saw quite a different side to the fraud than he had ever wanted to see.

“Pull your shirt down,” Ron said with disgust.

“You – you can’t do magic,” Lockhart whispered. “The Trace! The Aurors will come!”

“For you? Doubt it,” Ron said. “And there’s no need to be hostile. We’ve just come to have a little chat.”

“P-p-please...” Lockhart whimpered.

“You Obliviated me,” Harry said coldly. “How many times have you used your wand to take credit for someone else’s achievements?”

“N-n-never! I never Obliviated you—“

Harry sent a Stinging Hex directed at his foot. “Don’t lie, Lockhart.”

“Harry was trying to save me and you Obliviated him,” Ginny said. She turned to Harry. “What do you think we should do to him?”

“I say we kill him,” Ron said loudly. Harry knew that he was only half-joking. Lockhart screamed. “Just what the cowardly little squirt deserves.”

“That might be a good idea,” Harry said, pretending to think it over. “It would solve a lot of problems. I heard about the little hearing you

have set up with the Wizengamot. I've got to admit that I don't really want you to take the credit for what I did. Especially when you could have ruined everything."

"M-m-m-m—"

"I suggest you keep your mouth shut," Ginny said. "Until we tell you to open it."

"Here's the thing, Lockhart," Harry said. He crouched down. "You aren't worth killing," he whispered. He tilted the other man's head back and poured the first potion down the man's throat. "You know what this is? It's going to force you to tell the truth."

"That means that when you go before the Wizengamot tomorrow," Ron interjected gleefully. "You're going to tell them all about how you Obliviated Harry... I wouldn't expect that to be the only Memory Charm you admit to."

"W-why?" Lockhart wailed.

"Because you're also going to give the Wizengamot a message," Harry said pleasantly. "And after that, you're going to leave the country. I expect you'll want to. I'm afraid you're going to look rather bad after tomorrow. Only seven Best Smile awards; you'll never receive another again... you're finished in Britain."

Lockhart stuttered and stammered. He was unable to tell a lie, so he could not complete what he wanted to say: "You can't force me." Lockhart knew perfectly well – the entire Wizarding world of Britain did – that Harry was capable of the Imperius Curse.

"Yes, he can," said Ron, who also had caught the gist of what Lockhart was trying to say. He nudged Lockhart with his trainer. "Everyone knows that Harry used the Imperius Curse."

"I'll tell them!" Lockhart said. "I'll tell them you were here!"

"Yeah, that's sort of the point, you arse," Ginny said. "You're going to tell the Wizengamot exactly what happened tonight."

“And give them a message from us,” Ron said. Harry handed him the bottle containing the Compelling Draught, which would force Lockhart to go before the witches and wizards of the Wizengamot. “And make sure you’ve got a Truth-Sensor there so they’ll believe you.”

“Tell them: Be wary,” Harry said. This was to the Wizarding population as a whole. Then, to those who supported Voldemort, and would understand the true meaning of this message, “Beware.”

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GILDEROY LOCKHART: FRAUD!

By Meggie Clapham

In perhaps the most unique hearing the Wizengamot has ever held, Gilderoy Lockhart admitted to no less than forty counts of illegal Memory Charms. He stood before our judicial branch of the Ministry of Magic and told everyone there that his heroic deeds were in fact not done by him. Truth-Sensors were in place (as per the request of Lockhart), and it was revealed by Percy Ignatius Weasley, Court Scribe, that what he said was completely true.

In an even more bizarre twist of events, it is also true that Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley, and Ginevra Weasley (for a full article on the missing Weasley children, see page 4) visited Lockhart. Apparently the purpose of this visit was to prevent Lockhart from claiming that he was the one to defeat the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets almost three years ago. Lucius Malfoy suggested that Potter was hoping that his use of the Imperius Curse and the Cruciatus Curse would be forgiven upon the reminder that he had once been viewed as a hero.

Potter also delivered what can only be construed as a threat. “Potter deliberately sent Lockhart here,” Albus Dumbledore said. “Lockhart repeated the message no less than five times. ‘Be wary. Beware.’ I think it would be wise to heed his warning.”

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WARNING! WARNING! SEXY BITS AHEAD! AVAST, YE UNDERAGE READERS!

Harry stared at Ginny. Ginny stared at Harry. They only took their eyes off each other to stare at the grandfather clock in the sitting room. It was almost eleven o'clock, but the hands moved so slowly that Harry wondered if it just might be broken. He looked back at Ginny; her eyes were half-shut and she was eyeing his lips. He thought she might be purposefully tormenting him.

"Either of you want to play a game of chess?" Ron asked. He was smirking, so Harry knew that he was not serious. Harry made a rude hand gesture at him. Today was the tenth of August, and Ginny would officially be fourteen years old in little more than an hour. Harry felt almost sick with desire.

Ginny waved her wand and whispered "*Muffliato!*"

"Do you remember our first time?" she asked.

Harry gaped at her. "That's like asking me if I remember my own name. Of course I remember our first time."

He had only thought about it every seven seconds throughout the entire day and most of the last week; ever since they had humiliated Lockhart and had taken him down several notches in front of the entire Wizarding community, he had thought of little else except that Ginny would be fourteen, and their self-imposed abstinence would be at an end at long last. He only hoped that this first time would be as amazing as the last first time.... And then he remembered how badly it all had begun...

Harry was slowly being driven out of his mind. He and Ginny were under the same roof for the first time in over a year. Harry had apologized profusely to her just the other day; he never should have let his fear over what Voldemort might do to her force him away. The destruction of the Burrow had already proved that she wasn't safe... She had forgiven him. That wasn't the problem. The problem was that Grimmauld Place was far smaller than Hogwarts; the only secluded places were only private for approximately ten minutes before someone wandered by.

He lay on the bed, actively fantasizing about her. Everything about her filled him with desire. Her hair, her hands, her eyes and the way

her lips felt when she kissed him... He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes. He wanted to hold her. What he was doing was a poor substitute...

CRACK!

For one horrible moment, Harry froze, completely unable to move. Ginny, who had just turned seventeen, had Apparated into his room. He stared at her; he could not help but notice that she only wore a nightgown... the light illuminated her body from behind, and for a second Harry couldn't breathe. And she stared at him, though not at his face. There could be no denying what he was doing.

Harry did the only thing he could think of: he dived underneath the bedclothes that had tangled around his legs, and prayed fervently that she hadn't really been there at all, he'd only imagined her. He was blushing so fiercely that he thought he might pass out from the abrupt shift in where the majority of the blood in his body was located. He thought he might vomit. She hadn't left – why didn't she leave?!

"Are you going to let me Obliviate you?" Harry finally asked.

She answered by crawling under the bedclothes with him. He jerked horribly and almost fell off the bed.

"What are you hiding from?" she asked. Her voice was low and a little husky, and Harry's heart took a gigantic leap. She was close enough that her hair tickled his nose. He wanted to reach out and hold her, but still had that sick, embarrassed feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"From the most humiliating experience of my life," Harry answered honestly.

"I thought," she said, "it was pretty arousing."

He turned to look at her, forgetting that the covers were pulled over both their heads and he couldn't see her unless he was brave enough to come out. Not likely. She scooted closer and they were almost touching. "I do it too," Ginny said quietly.

And then Harry was kissing her with all the pent up longing that he had felt since the day of his seventeenth birthday. He had one hand in her long hair and one hand on her naked back. He pulled away.

“You’re naked!”

“So are you,” Ginny pointed out. “Well, almost.”

He took a deep, shuddering breath. It did not help; the blankets were rather suffocating. He poked his head out, and Ginny did the same. He stared at her for what felt like several minutes – or perhaps several days. Her eyes were heavy-lidded, and her lips were slightly parted. He knew that look well – he spent the last few weeks of his sixth year trying to put that look on her face every chance he got.

“I don’t want to be Obliviated,” she whispered. She picked up the wand she had laid on the nightstand and pointed it at the door, saying the charm that would lock them in. She added the Silencing Charm, and Harry’s heart skipped several beats. She pulled him flush up against her, and kissed him deeply. Harry returned the kiss urgently. His hands traveled down her back and to her bum, and he pulled her tighter against him. He propped her leg up on his, reached between their bodies and began to play.

“I’ve heard of... something,” he whispered in her ear. “I could... kiss you.”

She didn’t seem quite able to reply, but he took that as a yes. He threw the bedclothes (the same ones he had so recently been hiding underneath) off the bed, ripped off his boxers, and slid down her body. He could not help but stare, as he had never actually seen her like this before. They’d been too worried about getting caught. After a few moments, he bent his head and she screamed.

Harry had no idea how long he kept at it, though he knew that with every passing second, his desire grew. Small hands tugged at his shoulders. He followed them. He had never seen her look quite as beautiful as she did just then. She was flushed and sweaty, and her breath caught on a whimper. Her bright eyes were open, though, and that blazing look was once more on her face.

“Harry,” she moaned. “I want you.”

“That’s good,” Harry said. “Because I want you too.”

He fitted himself against her, resting his weight on his elbows. With one hand, he brushed her hair out of her eyes. With the other, he adjusted himself. “I think you should know, though. Before we do this. I’m in love with you.”

She pushed up against him with her hips. “That’s good,” Ginny said. “Because I’m in love with you too.”

He kissed her on the lips. He kept kissing her until they were fully joined. He did not stop kissing her – even though towards the end they both had trouble with anything more than moaning into each other’s mouths – until they finished.

Harry came out of reverie to realize that it was nearly time; and Ron had long since departed. Ten minutes until midnight. If they walked slowly, they would be in their bedroom at just the right moment. He stood up and held out his hand to her.

“Just so you know,” Harry said. “Before we do this. I’m in love with you.”

She grinned widely. “Good. Because I’m in love with you too.”

“Always and always, Ginny,” Harry said.

Chapter 25 – Without Warning

Snape's face was pale, and his black eyes glittered in the light of the lamps that lit the sitting room of Sirius' home in Godric's Hollow. The corners of his mouth dipped in a near-perpetual frown; he was in a horrible mood, Harry knew, but still. Snape was alive. A glass of firewhisky floated out from the kitchen, and Harry fought the urge to roll his eyes. Sirius apparently thought that if he remained hidden, Snape would not know who had given him the drink.

"He is... planning something," Snape said, after taking a long sip from the glass. "He will not tell me what it is."

"You don't think he's found out you didn't write that article, do you?" Ron asked.

"No," Harry and Snape said at the same time.

"I am still alive," Snape continued. "The Dark Lord would not allow me to live if he found out that I lied to him. No... it has nothing to do with the prophecy, though he has grown impatient of being thwarted at every turn."

Harry, whose connection with Voldemort allowed him to feel this quite plainly, grimaced. On the one hand, Voldemort was pleased by the fact that the Wizarding world had turned its back on Harry. On the other, the prophecy was guarded by Ministry of Magic employees. Voldemort alternated between fury and glee these days; it was not exactly comfortable.

"Any thoughts, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"No," Harry said. "Just little twinges, nothing that could tell us what he's planning, damn it. Why doesn't he tell you? Do you think it's because he doesn't really trust you?"

Snape shook his head. "No. The Dark Lord is as pleased with me as he is with Lucius Malfoy. I believe he trusts me as much as he trusts anyone. He is keeping his plans to himself."

"I have a feeling we'll find out whatever it is soon enough," Sirius said grimly.

"Potter," Snape said. "Do you happen to know how many Death Eaters there were in your future?"

"We never knew the exact number," Ginny said. "More than a hundred. Why?"

"Every time I am summoned to his side," Snape said evenly. "There are more and more servants. I am concerned that the ill-will toward Potter is making it easier for the Dark Lord to sway witches and wizards."

"Dumbledore said that might happen," Harry said. "Just keep trying to get their names. Any Ministry workers?"

"Several," Snape said. "Two in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement – they aren't senior members at all; thank Merlin it has not yet come to that. One in the Transportation office. There are more, I am sure."

"Are they *Imperiused*?" Ginny asked quietly.

"No," Snape said. He withdrew three flasks containing several hairs. "On a different – though related note – I have procured the hair you required from Yaxley, Alecto Carrow, and Amycus Carrow."

"Excellent," Harry said. Their next order of business required a public kidnapping; it was just as well that they would be disguised as real Death Eaters. Ron beamed. It had been his plan, and it was quite a good one. *Hermione*, Harry thought, *will be proud*.

"Now, if you will excuse me," Snape said. "I must also speak with Dumbledore this night."

Snape never stayed longer than he had to. Harry wondered if he thought he would not be a welcome guest. It was true that Snape was sour, sarcastic, and more than a little mean. His company was not exactly pleasant... but it was not quite the chore that Harry had expected it to be. He furrowed his brow, and poked at his feelings.

What he found there surprised him. He respected Snape, he recognized the other man's bravery, and... he actually *enjoyed Snape's company!*

Harry was so distracted by this utterly strange turn of events that he barely even noticed Snape depart. How could he possibly enjoy Snape's company? They were *allies*, not *friends*! Sure, he generally enjoyed the biting comments – if he didn't take it seriously (and he hadn't once since he had returned to his eleven year old body), they were amusing. And he did get the impression that Snape did not do it to torture him. But what the *hell*—

"Scar paining you, Potter?" Moody asked gruffly.

"No," Harry said distractedly. "Just thinking about what we're going to do tomorrow now that we've got the necessary ingredients. You do know where to find them, yes?"

"Of course," Moody said.

Harry pulled Ginny up to bed soon after that (despite the fact that it was only eight). Not that they actually made it to a bed for long minutes. After they had finished and had collapsed exhausted onto the bed, Ginny traced little, soothing patterns on his chest with her fingernails.

"What had you looking so odd when Snape left?" Ginny asked. "I know you aren't really worried about tomorrow."

Harry told her. "I just never expected it, Ginny," he finished. "But I suppose it's because he's very different now. And I trust him. But I actually see him as one of us – not just a member of the Order of the Phoenix, but one of us. People I like spending time with, and not only because of Voldemort, and not only to make plans."

Ginny snorted. "You sound so *aghast*, Harry. I've been seeing this coming for a while."

"You could have warned me," Harry said sourly.

He felt her shrug. "Didn't think you needed it."

"It's weird," Harry said again.

"I know," she said softly. "Everything has changed so much. Snape... my *family*..." her voice trailed away. Tears fell on his chest, and he pulled her closer, offering wordless comfort. He did not know what had been said before she and Ron had left the Burrow. He had not even read the articles in the *Daily Prophet* about the Weasleys and their two missing children, suspected to be on the run with Harry Potter. He'd kept away from it. But he knew that whatever had been said had infuriated Ginny and Ron; but, more than that, it had broken their hearts.

Harry clenched his teeth. Ginny drew in a shuddering breath. He turned over onto his side, and pulled her closer to him. He stroked her hair and her back while she cried in earnest. Harry knew quite well what she was going through. When he had been exiled from the Burrow, he had felt like his heart had been ripped out of his chest. He had understood – he knew that no mother and father could condone what he and Ginny had done. He'd even understood that they had legitimate concerns about his influence on their children.

But holding Ginny while she cried nearly every night, and seeing the contained grief in Ron's eyes... Harry was not so understanding anymore. He suspected that Ginny and Ron had another reason for keeping the details of what had happened to themselves, besides just sparing Harry's feelings. When all was said and done... when the world knew the truth about Voldemort, and Harry's role in his defeat... Ginny and Ron wanted Harry to forgive.

He wondered if that was even possible anymore.

He did not want Ginny to cry herself to sleep again. He tilted her head up and gave her a long, slow kiss. They had perfected this form of making love long ago; he knew exactly what she needed to draw comfort from it. He used every skill at his disposal, and she fell asleep with a smile. So did Harry.

The next morning was spent in busy preparations – mostly on the part of Moody. Harry's, Ron's, and Ginny's role did not require all that much finesse, though Harry was looking forward to it nonetheless. He felt confident. They were taking a risk, but it was worth it. His skills at

dueling (and Ginny's and Ron's) were increasing dramatically at the insistence of Moody. He could only beat Moody one time out of three, but he was improving bit by bit.

Moody left the house a little after noon. As Harry knew that it might be a long wait, he forced himself to practice human transfiguration on Ginny and Ron. He didn't think he would ever be particularly good at it like Hermione was. As disguise was essential to all of their plans, however, and it was possible that Polyjuice Potion might fail them one day, he doggedly kept on.

Sirius heckled him for a while ("Harry, what are you meaning to tell Ginny when you give her bigger breasts? Are you giving Ron a little extra, too?"). He left several hours later to attend a meeting at the Ministry between Scrimgeour, Shacklebolt, the Weasleys, and a few others. *It was, Harry thought, fortuitous that Sirius would have an iron-clad alibi.*

At a little past four, Moody's bear Patronus jumped through the wall and faced Harry. "*I've got them. Do your thing.*"

Ginny immediately strode over to the cauldron of Polyjuice Potion that was kept in the small room off the sitting room. She dipped a cup, and added the hair that Snape had procured from Alecto Carrow. It steamed and turned a sickening shade of red; Harry fought the urge to knock it out of her hands.

Harry took up his own cup, as did Ron. They stood together in a triangle, and toasted each other. "This really was a brilliant plan, Ron," Harry told him.

Ron grinned, not at all modest. Several days after they had taken care of Lockhart, Ron had suggested they discredit (and hopefully send to Azkaban) some of the new Death Eaters that had joined Voldemort, and help protect Ollivander at the same time. Initially, Harry had thought that it would be wise to expose some of the more senior members, such as Lucius Malfoy or Nott, or any of the others that had been present at the graveyard. But Ron had pointed out the major flaw in that.

Not only were they tricking the Ministry into suspecting the Carrows and Yaxley were in league with Harry, but they were tricking Voldemort into thinking his three new Death Eaters had done this on their own initiative. In order to do that, it could not be traced back to Harry... so the older, more dangerous wizards had to be left alone... for now.

Harry could not help but grin. "To rampant stupidity," he said, and tossed the potion back. He grimaced – it tasted the way unwashed body and pond scum smelled – but he didn't retch.

"Yaxley's a nasty blighter," Ron muttered, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. As soon as they completed their change, Harry grasped their hands, turned on the spot, and took them to Diagon Alley. Despite the fact that he was disguised as a Death Eater, it felt good to be out and about in the sunshine. It was quite crowded; parents and Hogwarts students were bustling from shop to shop, picking up last minute items they needed for the coming term.

Harry kept a close watch for Neville, Hermione, and Luna; he did not truly expect to see them, but he looked anyway. Ron was so busy looking for Hermione that he barely paid attention to anything else, not even when he nearly trampled a pair of rambunctious wizard children.

"Sorry," he muttered in Yaxley's voice.

Harry caught sight of Dean Thomas, Lavender Brown, Parvati Patil, and Seamus Finnigan standing a little ways away from Florean Fortescue's ice cream shop. They were staring at a poster on the wall and speaking in low, anxious voices. Harry could not quite make out what they were saying... he wanted to know, as it was Harry's own face that looked down at the four of them. Ginny tugged at his arm.

They took their time, making sure that enough people saw them. They had to be clearly identified, so they waited until each of them had been greeted by name before making their way to Ollivander's wand shop. Ginny entered first, while Harry and Ron loitered outside the door. She stuck her head back out a few moments later. "All clear," she said in a low voice.

Ron raised his wand – and the curse that came out of it blew up a section of the alley, and an empty table outside the Fortescue's. The screams were loud and immediate. Ron waved his wand again, and smoke obscured them.

“What the hell—“

“ALERT THE AURORS!”

“Get the kids out of here, Mary, NOW!”

Harry and Ron ducked inside the shop to find Mr. Ollivander already tied up and sitting on the chair. His eyes were wide and terrified. Harry only gave him a cursory look, before turning back to the door and using the Impenetrable Charm. “Did you shield the wands?” Harry asked Ginny.

“Yes,” she said. “They’ll be protected. Well... most of them.”

Harry grimaced. He did not especially like the idea of destroying the man’s livelihood, even if it would be several years until Ollivander came back to it. The shelves were stacked with small black boxes that contained wands Ollivander had created with his own two hands. He was protecting the wandmaker as best he could; he only hoped that the old man would be able to see it that way... eventually...

He tapped his throat with his wand, muttering the charm that would make his voice louder for the benefit of those outside listening. Pointing his wand at nothing, he shouted, “YOU TELL ME, OLD MAN! *Crucio!*” The curse destroyed a section of the shelves, sending boxes tumbling down.

“*Crucio!*” Ginny shouted, and more wands rained down to the floor.

Ron raised his voice, and said in a trembling voice that sounded remarkably like Ollivander’s, “No! No! I don’t know!”

“LIES!” Harry roared. “OUR MASTER KNOWS YOU KNOW THE TRUTH!”

“*Crucio!*” Ron shouted in his own voice.

Harry found himself wishing that the twins were in on this plan; they would have invented several different useful items for them to use to make it look like they were laying waste to the entire shop without actually doing so. Ginny, once she had used her obligatory Unforgivable, immediately began Banishing all the wands she could back to Godric's Hollow.

The screams from outside were growing louder; Harry knew that they did not have much more time.

"TELL US, OLD MAN!" he screamed. "TELL US!"

"Maybe if we destroy his precious wands..." Ron said in an ugly voice.

"Do it," Harry said.

Ron again used his skills at impersonation, "No! Please don't—"

Harry and Ron waited until the last wand was Banished and then, together, they shouted "*REDUCTO!*" and blew up all the shelves... fine ash rained down on them. Harry used a Smashing Jinx to destroy five of the wands, grimacing with regret as he did so. "Sorry," he said to Ollivander, taking the charm off his voice, "it's got to look real."

Ollivander gaped at him, opening and closing his mouth like a fish. Ginny had Silenced him, but Harry did not think he was capable of saying anything. He looked extremely confused. "I live at 7 Skyview Lane, Godric's Hollow," Harry added in a whisper. "Keep that in mind."

They waited a few minutes longer, generally wreaking havoc and destroying as much of the store as they could. Harry renewed the charm on his voice. "TELL US OR WE KILL YOU! *Crucio*"—the ancient till exploded—"Crucio! TELL US OR I'LL DRIVE YOU INSANE!"

It was not until determined Aurors cursed the door repeatedly that Harry knew that it was time to go. "You didn't have to die," Harry said. The efforts to get past Harry's Impenetrable Charm redoubled, and Harry knew that the Aurors had heard him. He nodded at Ron, who started cursing everything within reach, loud bangs issuing from his

wand that masked the sound of Ginny's Disapparation, and her reappearance moments later.

"Use the Reductor Curse," Ginny said in a cruel voice. "Let's watch him disappear in a bunch of itsy, bitsy pieces..."

"Good thinkin', Alecto," Harry said, mimicking her tone. "We've wasted a bunch of Unforgivables today, haven't we?"

Ron let out a ghastly scream, and then all three shouted "*REDUCTO!*" at the desk. Ginny used her wand to sweep the ash into a more human looking pile. In the next moment, the Aurors blasted through the Impenetrable Charm. Harry caught sight of the look on Kingsley's face, turned on the spot, and Disapparated with a loud *CRACK!*

As soon as Ron and Ginny appeared beside him, he let out a loud whoop and grabbed Ginny up into a hug and pounded Ron's back. "That went even better than expected!" he crowed. "I didn't even intend for them to see us..."

"We just barely escaped," Ginny pointed out. But she was grinning at his enthusiasm.

"It's a good thing they can't do Anti-Apparation Jinxes in Diagon Alley," Ron said.

There was a muffled, furtive sound from behind Harry. He'd almost forgotten about Mr. Ollivander, who had been placed on the sofa, surrounded by piles and piles of his own wands. "Keep him bound," Harry told Ginny. "Just for a few minutes longer."

However, Harry used his own wand to end the Silencing Charm. "Look," Harry said. "I'm really sorry about what just happened – I know you must be really confused."

"I am more than a little confused, Harry Potter," Mr. Ollivander said. Harry's eyes widened. How had he known who he was? "I recognized your wand. It is not Amycus Carrow's."

“You’re lucky it’s Harry and not Carrow,” Ron informed him. “Carrow really would have killed you – he’s a Death Eater.”

“Can we get you anything to drink, Mr. Ollivander?” Ginny asked. “We’ve got a bit of a story to tell you.”

“Will you get me a butterbeer, Ginny?” Harry asked. “I’ve still got a bad taste in my mouth – Amysus tasted awful.” Harry idly began using magic to stack the boxes. They would find a place for them at Grimmauld Place once Dumbledore showed up and gave Ollivander the secret.

“What – is – going – on?” Ollivander found his voice.

Harry took a sip of the butterbeer Ginny had placed in his hand. “I’m protecting you. You’re probably not going to believe me – but Voldemort is back. He returned the night I was accused of using the Imperius Curse to suit my own aims as the next Dark Wizard.”

“You did use the Imperius Curse,” Ginny murmured.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I did. We were taken by a Portkey into a graveyard... I noticed that the headstone said Tom Riddle—”

“He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’s real name,” Ollivander whispered.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “So I *Imperiused* Cedric to get him away from there. I did it to protect him... the same reason why I abducted you. When Voldemort returned, he tried to duel me. Our wands didn’t work against each other – I assume this is because of what you told me when I first bought the holly-and-phoenix wand? Because they’re brothers?”

There was an arrested look on Ollivander’s face. “*Priori Incantatem...*”

“Exactly,” Harry nodded. “I imagine Voldemort is curious about it. And I assumed that he would go after you. I can guess what methods he’d use to get it out of you.” In fact, Harry did not even have to guess. He’d seen the man tortured through his scar. Repeatedly. He’d also

seen the state of Ollivander's body when he, Ron, and Hermione had been locked in the cellar of Malfoy Manor.

"And how did you know—"

"I told him," Dumbledore interrupted Ollivander. He had arrived without Harry noticing it.

"You – Dumbledore – I –" Ollivander stammered. "Is it true? What Potter is saying? But... aren't you trying to search for him? I – what?"

"Harry contacted me immediately after Voldemort returned," Dumbledore said. "I decided to meet him in a safe location... I was going to bring him to the Ministry... but Harry did not threaten to attack; in fact, he had just *been* attacked. I followed a hunch, and used my Pensieve to view his memories of that night. Harry is not lying. Voldemort has returned."

"But the Ministry—"

"The Ministry would never believe me," Harry informed him. "So we're working quietly. Dumbledore is using the Ministry to help us and hinder Voldemort. He's the one who told us that you might be in danger," Harry lied.

Moody chose that moment to Apparate into the sitting room.

"You're – you're DEAD!" Ollivander yelled.

"Not quite," Moody said grimly. "It's been taken care of, Potter. The Aurors are already swarming, and the Death Eaters fully believe that they were the ones to attack Ollivander," Moody nodded at Ron. "Well done, boy."

Ron beamed.

"And you," Moody growled at Ollivander. "You're just as dead as I am. Only way we could get You-Know-Who's attention off you."

"He – he might find out anyway," Ollivander said. "There are books and articles about wandlore, you know."

“Yeah,” Moody said. “But this way he doesn’t have to torture you to do it.”

Ollivander’s eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he toppled over, knocking over the stacks of boxes Harry had made.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

It was exceedingly dangerous for Harry, Ron, and Ginny to cross the barrier that led to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ and get onto the train, but they did it anyway. The Disillusionment Charm and the Revulsion Charm held up very well, however, and they were able to slip under the noses of the grim-eyed Aurors, who were supposed to be on the watch for just this sort of thing.

It felt very odd for Harry to see the students. They were yelling, chatting, hugging their parents, and generally acting as though nothing was wrong. He even saw Cedric – he was snogging Cho Chang goodbye. He searched the crowd until he realized that he was looking for the familiar, bright red hair of the Weasleys. They would be here – the twins still had one more year left, after all. He fixed his eyes straight ahead.

All three leapt up onto the train, and quickly found a quiet spot that was not generally used until about halfway through the journey to Hogwarts: the loo. “*Muffliato!*” Harry said. “Ron – you have the Marauder’s Map, right?”

“Of course,” Ron said, pulling it out of his pocket. “I almost switched it with the new one, though. That could’ve been bad.”

“Good thing you caught it,” Ginny murmured. “You know... your dad was a very talented wizard, Harry. Sirius told me that he’s the one who figured out all the enchantments.”

“Like father, like son,” Harry quipped and she laughed.

“I wish we could bring Hermione back with us,” Ron said morosely. “Doubt she’d go for it, though, even if I asked. ‘Ronald Weasley,’” he said with an uncanny imitation of his future wife’s voice. “‘You know

how important education is! Just because you're off in hiding, doesn't mean I should be!"

"She'll loosen up," Harry pointed out.

"Not this year," Ron said darkly. "Not with the precious OWLs to get through – damn, I'm glad we don't have to live through that again."

The train lurched forward and slowly began to pull away from King's Cross. The sound of stampeding feet faded away, and Harry knew that the students had placed all their belongings away, and had settled into their compartments.

"Let's go find them," Ron said, after the train had left London. They could see rolling hills and pastureland outside the window.

As silently as possible, they made their way down the train, peering into each compartment, looking for Hermione, Neville, and Luna. They found them in the second to last compartment, and Harry breathed a huge sigh of relief when he realized they were alone. From the anxious, fearful looks on their faces, he guessed that they were speaking about him.

"Clear," Ginny murmured. Harry opened the door.

"It's us," he hissed. The reaction was immediate: Hermione screamed and clapped her hand over her mouth, Neville fell off the chair, and Luna dropped her copy of the *Quibbler*.

"*Ron!*" Hermione whispered, she cringed toward the window. "Harry – Ginny! Don't you know how *dangerous* it is for you to be here?"

Harry lifted the Revulsion Charm, and all three of them stopped trying to get as far away from Harry, Ginny, and Ron as possible. "Yeah, we know," Harry said. "But it was worth it. Merlin, we've missed the three of you."

"*Muffliato!*" Ginny said firmly. "It doesn't hurt to be careful, Harry."

"It's been *madness*," Neville said fervently. "I've been worried all summer... I'm glad you didn't write, though. The Ministry's been watching us – me and Gran – ever since your trial."

"I heard that she defended me," Harry said, smiling. "And your dad, too, Luna."

"I didn't tell her anything," Neville assured him. "But I told her that I knew you wouldn't have done it if you didn't have a good reason. And that I thought you didn't do it to Krum and Fleur, either. She believed me."

Ginny and Ron exchanged pained looks. Harry knew exactly what they were thinking about (the fact that their parents had done and said whatever it was that had driven them out of the Burrow), so he ignored them. "We've been busy," Harry said. He told them about Lockhart and got a standing ovation. Hermione beamed at Ron when he told her the scheme he'd thought up to discredit Death Eaters, and take Mr. Ollivander away to safety.

"That was *brilliant*, Ron!" Hermione breathed, her face alight.

"Thank you," Ron said. "Listen – we can't stay much longer, probably only another half an hour. Neville..." he said, pulling out the Marauder's Map and giving it to Neville. "Will you give this to Fred and George? And – here's yours. Don't mix them up; look, I've put a little red X on the old one."

"Right," Neville nodded. "Er – what do you want me to do with it?"

"Just keep safe," Ron shrugged. "We have another one. We'll be spying on Umbridge and the children of known Death Eaters. If you see anything weird, anything at all... contact us."

Neville exchanged looks with Luna. "How are we to do that? My Patronus is barely corporeal; I don't think I can make it talk yet. Hermione can do it, but..."

"Don't worry, Neville," Harry said. He withdrew three mirrors from the pockets of his robes. "These are two-way mirrors. Just say our names – Neville, you're connected to mine; Luna, you're with Ginny;

Hermione, you're with Ron – and we'll be able to talk. And watch"—he tapped it with his wand and said "Bitch" and it turned into a galleon—"in case Umbridge comes along, you do that and she won't catch you. Technically, the word 'bitch' is now a spell—"

"Specifically for this purpose," Ginny grinned. "Sirius thought of it."

"And it can be used non-verbally," Harry continued. "Just make sure you keep your wand and the mirror in the same pocket."

"Harry," Neville said seriously, once they had all finished laughing. "You know I'd rather come with you than stay in school? I'm sorry that I... can't. I thought for a moment that you were going to abduct us. But my Gran – she would really worry. And I'm not like you guys... I haven't gone through school yet. If I'm going to help, I need to keep learning."

"My dad told me that I was not to run off with you yet," Luna said.

"You know we want the three of you with us," Ron said. "But we wouldn't have forced you to. Besides, it would just make things more complicated. Especially for the two of you. Hermione's a Muggle-born; Dumbledore could have told the Ministry that her parents were too worried to let her stay in. But that wouldn't have worked for either of you."

Harry glanced out the window. Tall trees flashed by; between them, he could see the hint of a lake. He sighed with regret. They were going to have to leave, and Harry had no idea when he would be able to see them again; being in hiding felt very lonely without them all of a sudden.

"Listen," Harry cleared his throat. "We think we'll be able to meet you in the Room of Requirement sometimes. Not – not all the time... but we will see you."

"You're leaving already?" Luna asked.

"We have to," Harry said. "We can't risk getting off the train in Hogsmeade. Every other person on the street will be an Auror."

Moody would have our heads if we took that kind of risk. It was different on the platform."

"Ron," Hermione spoke for the first time in ten minutes. She had been deep in thought, but she now she gazed at Ron with a quiet certainty. "Ron, I want to come with you."

Ron looked as though he'd been hit in the back of the head with a Bludger. "What?" he said blankly. Ginny rolled her eyes, and Harry fought a smile. He could not say that he was completely surprised. He'd known for a while that it had been a long time since Hermione had placed her schoolwork above Ron.

"I'm coming with you," Hermione said firmly.

"But what about your OWLs?" Ron asked.

Instead of replying, Hermione leaned over and kissed him full on the mouth. "Taking down V-V-Voldemort is more important. And so are you."

"I'll get her trunk," Harry volunteered. "We've got to act fast. Disillusion her, Ron."

He threw himself out of the compartment and toward the luggage rack. He walked purposefully, but had to shrink back against the wall when the door to the last compartment opened and the twins walked out.

"We'll just ask them if they know where they are," Fred said.

"Didn't the Ministry tell us that there had apparently been no contact between any of them this summer?" George asked.

"Ron and Ginny knew where he was," Fred pointed out. "Two days after they left the Burrow, they were seen with him. Longbottom, Granger, and Lovegood might know too."

Before they could say another word, Harry pointed his wand at them and froze their bodies. Unlike *Petrificus Totalus*, however, the twins did not topple over... and they would not know that anyone had used

a mild hex against them. Still, he had maybe a minute. He used magic to Summon her trunk; he then shrunk it and put it in his pocket.

"We've got to go," he said urgently, once he had returned. "Now." He opened the window, and felt Ginny's warm hand in his. She was standing on top of the long, padded bench, and she pulled him up with her. The train was going over the bridge now, and the water of the lake far below them glinted in the afternoon sunlight. Ginny shifted, and he knew that she was preparing to jump.

"What are we doing?" Hermione asked anxiously. "Why is the window open?"

"Can't Apparate from the train," Ron said. "We've got to jump – shit, Harry! Tell her where we're going!"

Harry's heart fell to his stomach. Hermione could have been very badly injured if Ron had attempted to Apparate with her to Sirius' house. "7 Skyview Lane, Godric's Hollow," he said in a shaky voice. "Think about that."

"I'll do that when I'm falling to my death," Hermione said. Her voice trembled. "I hate heights."

"Do you trust me?" Ron asked.

Harry did not stay behind for the answer. Ginny had tugged him out the window with her; there was a mad moment of free-falling. He felt her twist in mid-air, and a second later they were in the sitting room, side by side on the couch.

"How'd it go?" Remus asked.

"We—"

There was a loud *CRACK!* and Ron and Hermione appeared.

"—brought Hermione with us," Ginny finished.

The next few days were very bright for Harry and for the rest of the inhabitants at either the house in Godric's Hollow or Grimmauld Place.

Even Mr. Ollivander had apparently accepted the fact that he was not going to be allowed to go back to his shop until Voldemort had been defeated. He had accepted their reasons without too much fuss, especially after he had had a long, private discussion with Dumbledore.

Ron was especially ecstatic; it helped that he knew now that Hermione viewed him as more than a friend. Harry and Ginny had had a laugh about it that first night in bed; no matter how old, how skilled, or how brave Ron was, he could always be reduced to a quivering mass of fear without Hermione there to tell him she loved him.

The stretch of bright days ended without warning.

Harry slept. And while he slept, he dreamed of a home shaped like a rook.

He held the arm of a screaming woman. It was an unfortunate necessity that she could not have simply been killed in her home. But in order for Potter to be blamed unequivocally for these murders – and it would take little effort – he had to play his hand very carefully indeed. These two purebloods had been the only voices that had defended Harry Potter.

And more than that, they were the answer to the laughable warning Potter had given by way of that fool, Gilderoy Lockhart. I will kill your friends, Voldemort thought. And make them think it was you. He laughed, and the old woman screamed and kicked again. Potter had no idea who he was up against. Voldemort was the most powerful wizard alive, and Potter was quickly becoming the most reviled. Snape had seen to that; tonight, Voldemort would insure that no one would ever bring themselves to trust Harry Potter again.

He blasted the door open. An odd old man – Voldemort laughed again, Potter surrounds himself with absurdities and old women... he's hardly a threat – gaped at him. Voldemort pushed the old woman away from him. There were two flashes of green light, and the old man and the older woman fell lifeless to the ground.

Voldemort pulled out the letter he had forced Augusta Longbottom to write using the Imperius Curse. It was sufficiently damning that even when Voldemort chose to reveal his return to the world, the world would always remember that Harry Potter murdered Augusta Longbottom and Xenophilius Lovegood simply because they had attempted to end their support of him.

“Harry! Harry, wake up!” Ginny shouted in his ear.

“No... no... NO!” Harry bellowed. He was tangled in the bedclothes, and his entire body was covered with sweat. The muscles in his face hurt, and his jaw was clenched so tight that it ached. He rolled away from Ginny and vomited over the side of the bed. “They’re dead,” he said in disbelief. Harry had been forced to watch like a passive spectator. It was not at all like when he had seen Arthur Weasley attacked by a giant snake. He’d had a chance... but there was no doubt that Mrs. Longbottom and Mr. Lovegood were dead. “They’re dead, I can’t believe it. Ginny, we’ve got to – got to –”

“Who is dead?” Ginny asked. Her eyes were wide and full of fear. Harry knew that she thought of her parents, her family; but the Weasleys were safe, shielded by their hatred of Harry. They were in more danger of being *recruited* by Voldemort than being murdered by him. The thought made him retch again.

He touched his fists to his scar, as though if he pressed it hard enough, he could change what had just happen, what he had just seen. “Neville’s Gran,” Harry said. It hurt his chest to speak. *Neville... Luna...* “and Luna’s dad.”

Chapter 26 – Potter's Army

"It's my fault," Neville whispered. He had not spoken a word for nearly an hour. The headmaster's office had been silent since Harry had explained falteringly, and with tears streaming down his face, what had happened.

Harry, who had been thinking precisely the same thing except in terms of himself and not Neville, jerked his head around. How did Neville work that one out? "It isn't your fault—"

"It is," Neville insisted. His face was twisted in a grimace of pain; he was shaking and looked as ill as Harry felt. Luna had not stopped wailing; it was a low, keening sound full of pain that tore at Harry's insides. "I t-t-told her that she should say something. She was owling Mr. Lovegood too... I don't think he would have said anything about it if it weren't for her. If it weren't for me."

You've got it all wrong, Harry wanted to say. But he knew the signs of self-blame; Merlin knew that he had been there often enough. And it would take Neville a long time before he would be able to place the blame entirely where it belonged: on Voldemort. Nothing Harry could say would change this, so he did the only thing he could. He grabbed Neville's shoulders and hugged him.

"It isn't your fault," Harry said. "It's Voldemort's fault."

Hermione and Ginny wept with Luna and stroked her long, dirty blonde hair. Ron had one hand on Hermione's shoulder, and the other on Ginny's. His blue eyes were wet. So were Harry's. In fact, Harry felt as though he were spinning out of control. *This wasn't supposed to happen... why did this happen... how could I let this happen?* He should have known... he should have made sure that they were protected. He *knew* how dangerous it was to befriend Harry Potter. It was never more evident than at this moment.

"I should," Harry's voice broke. "I should have made sure they were protected. Neville, Luna – if we'd had *any* idea..."

Neville tried to pull himself together; it took visible effort. “It isn’t your fault either,” Neville said hoarsely. Each word appeared to be torn out of him. “If I can’t blame myself... you can’t.”

Harry grimaced. He knew that he had not used his wand and murdered the only family his two friends had left. *No*, he told himself firmly. *Not the only family. We’re their family.* “All right. All right.”

Neville looked as haggard and weary as a man one hundred years older than Dumbledore. He blindly reached for a chair, sat down, and put his head in his hands. He took a deep, shuddering breath. Harry gripped Neville’s shoulder and felt his own lips tremble; the lamps in the room shone oddly through his tears.

“I just – I just can’t believe she’s gone,” Neville said. “Just – like that.”

Luna spoke up then; Harry had not noticed that she had stopped wailing. “She – they aren’t really gone, Neville,” she was gasping a little, as though every word caused her mortal pain. “They aren’t. They – they’re watching us. They still love us. Goodbye is never really forever...”

“I agree,” Hermione said, heartfelt.

“As do I,” Dumbledore said firmly.

Neville and Luna seemed to need silence. The hours passed. Dumbledore, Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, and Sirius (Moody had gone to destroy the letter Voldemort had left) all stood a sort of vigil over their grief. There were murmurs – Harry even murmured some, but he did not know exactly what he said. Words came to him as though from a deep well inside his mind, one that he did not have ready access to. The rune that meant pain swam in front of his vision; Harry saw it in line of Neville’s clenched jaw, and the curve of Luna’s back.

There was one last hug, and Neville and Luna left.

“Professor Dumbledore,” Hermione said softly. “What about – what about my parents?”

“I do not believe they were harmed this night. Harry would have—“

“No,” she interrupted. “They need to be safe. I... they told me what I did – a Memory Charm. I want that to happen again. They... wouldn’t understand, if we told them. So – can one of you...?”

“I’ll do it,” Sirius said gently. “Just tell me where they live.”

She did so, and he left immediately. Harry did not fully like the idea of toying with Mr. and Mrs. Granger’s memories. But Hermione knew them a lot better than Harry did. And it wasn’t as if they were stealing memories... Sirius would only give them different ones. And as soon as this was over, Mr. and Mrs. Granger would be restored. As soon as the fire in the hearth flared green, she sank into a chair and let out a low moan, as if what she had done had caused her physical pain. Ron knelt beside her, and wrapped his arms around her.

“What about,” Ginny said; her lips were white. “What about my – our – parents? What if they—“

Harry did not think it was likely. Voldemort had not thought of the Weasleys at all. Though Harry had avoided any mention of them, he had not buried his head in the sand completely. He’d caught glimpses of headlines after Ron and Ginny had left the Burrow. He knew that it was no great secret how Molly and Arthur felt about him. But he could not bear to tell Ginny this. It was a pain – perhaps just as strong as Hermione’s, though in a different way – in Harry’s heart that the Weasleys needed no protection from Voldemort.

Harry knew that Dumbledore was thinking along these same lines. Harry guessed that even Ron and Ginny were thinking this; Hermione certainly was. But it would not be mentioned, because that would be admitting to something no one wanted to say out loud.

“There are wards that we can put up,” Dumbledore said in a subdued voice. “We can put them up around the Burrow. If you will allow me to think on it for a day, I will decide which ones will be most suited for our purposes.”

“Subtle ones,” Ron said. “We don’t want them figuring it out. They’d go to the effing *Prophet* and then Voldemort would figure out that we want to protect them. It’d be open season.”

“Blood wards,” Dumbledore murmured to himself. “But which?” He dug through an old trunk full of books.

“Let’s go back home,” Ron said. “Hermione, you look like you’re about to fall over. Let’s get you to bed.”

“I don’t care how sad I am,” Hermione whispered. “I’m still not sleeping in your room.”

“Not yet,” Ron said with a hint of a smile.

“Harry,” Ginny whispered. “I want to make sure that they’re – that they’re okay. I’m going to go to the Burrow. I know you probably don’t want to go—”

“Try and stop me,” Harry said, though she was right. He absolutely did not want to go to the peaceful Burrow. He felt like seeing it might feel quite like a knife to the gut. But Ginny would not be able to rest easily unless she did this. And Harry would not let her stand watch over her parents’ house alone.

They used the Floo to go back to Sirius’ home in Godric’s Hollow, and from there they Apparated to the small lane. Harry disillusioned himself and Ginny – wishing, with a pang, that he still had his invisibility cloak – and they crept up to the slanted building.

“*Homenum Revelio*,” Ginny whispered. “There are three people in there,” she told Harry. “I’m assuming it’s Mum, Dad, and Percy.”

Harry nodded. They found a comfortable patch of grass beneath a tree that afforded them a good view of the Burrow. Harry rested his back against the tree, and Ginny sat between his legs and leaned up against his chest. They both had their wands out and ready... but neither truly thought there would be an attack.

The sun rose and painted the Burrow in golden, early morning light. Shadows moved across the windows; the inhabitants were stirring,

preparing for the day, unaware of being watched. For the first time in a long time, Harry felt himself remembering the Weasleys the way they had been. The Burrow had been a refuge for Harry, much more so than even Hogwarts. Mrs. Weasley, mothering and loving; Mr. Weasley, who always made time for his children (and Harry); the Weasley brothers who treated Harry like he was one of theirs... they had all played such a huge part in making Harry who he was.

Harry laughed, and Ginny turned her head to the sound.

“What is it?”

“I’m just remembering your mum,” Harry said. “Remember when the twins used Polyjuice Potion to fool her? And she thought they were two random Muggle boys from the village who came looking for a glass of water?”

Ginny snorted. “Mum was so confused... she had no idea why the Muggle Repelling Charm had failed. And Fred and George kept asking questions... ‘What was that brown thing that just ran by? It looked like a little person!’ or ‘How did that clock know that your son was coming home from work?’”

“The look on her face when they started turning back into themselves...” Harry chortled.

“What about the time when Dad first saw Ron and Hermione snogging?” Ginny said. “The poor man... he was so confused! I think he was the only Weasley surprised by Ron falling in love with Hermione – though maybe he was more surprised by Hermione falling in love with Ron, come to think of it.”

“Did you know that he gave Ron the sex talk right after that, did we ever tell you?” Harry asked. “I was up in Ron’s room, and your dad came in and immediately started talking. I couldn’t even escape! I don’t think he noticed me, though, which was good because I think it was only three days after you and I slept together.”

“Poor Harry,” Ginny said. “Though it explains how you suddenly learned the Contraception Charm.”

“Remember when you and your entire family thought that when Charlie talked about Norberta, he was talking about a girl and not a dragon?” Harry grinned. “For over a year?”

Ginny snickered. “Mum lamented over the fact that she wouldn’t be able to come for Christmas because of the war for weeks and weeks...”

Harry had no idea how much time passed while they reminisced about the family. The sun climbed higher and higher into the sky, reached its zenith, and started working its way down again. The backs of Harry’s eyes felt scratchy from lack of sleep, but he did not feel tired. They kept their unseen vigil.

Gradually, their voices tapered off. Harry could think of any number of stories – both silly and sweet – of the Weasley family, but now he preferred to sit in silence. Arthur, Molly, and Percy were still in the house; it was Saturday, and no one had to work. He wondered what they were saying, what they were talking about. He suspected that a widely discussed topic was the absence of their youngest son and daughter... and what Harry might be doing to them.

“Remember how we never even considered that things might be... different?” Harry said in a low voice. “I remember that conversation with Dumbledore’s portrait. If there was one thing I was certain of, it was your parents’ affection.”

“He was so adamant that we weren’t to tell Mum and Dad and the others until Voldemort returned,” Ginny said in a low voice. “Ron and I... while we were at the Burrow earlier in the summer, before the huge argument... we started wondering if maybe he knew.”

Harry smiled. It was so easy to think of Dumbledore as having powers beyond any other wizard. But Dumbledore was, after all, just a man. “I don’t think—”

“And we don’t either,” Ginny said. “Not really. He couldn’t possibly have known... but I just – I just can’t help thinking – I know it’s awful... but if my parents had been supportive of you, they could very well have been killed by Voldemort last night.”

Harry had already thought of this. A small voice in the back of his head had repeated the refrain: *Thank Merlin it wasn't the Weasleys... thank Merlin it wasn't the Weasleys*. He felt horrible for even thinking it; it was awful that Augusta Longbottom and Xeno Lovegood had been murdered. But he had to admit to himself that he might well have given everything up had the Weasleys been lost last night. Irrational anger directed toward the Weasleys surged up inside him. He hated it that he felt at all relieved about the situation. He hated it that his heart seemed to be torn to shreds... because of them.

Ginny seemed to sense his tension. "Remember how we came back in time to save them? Always and always, Harry. That was the promise. No matter what."

She was right. But Harry knew that something had broken inside him. The chain that had bound him to the Weasleys had broken. He loved them, yes, but he loved the memories of them, not who they actually were. And he loved them because Ginny still loved them, despite the fact that Molly and Arthur must have said some terrible things. But the Molly and Arthur of this time and this place... Harry thought he might loathe them. It was unfair to them... but the rational, reasonable part of him was growing fainter and fainter.

Harry eventually dozed in the late afternoon sun. He slid into sleep, and into a nightmare. He was in the Forbidden Forest, and people were calling out his name. He hurried toward their voices, but it was difficult to manage because the trees were upside down... he ran and ran, until he came to a sharp cliff. He looked across, and saw all the Weasleys wearing golden crowns standing on the other side. He looked down and saw that the cliff had no bottom, but something bright and shining was coming up to him... a giant copy of the pain rune approached, providing a bridge to the other side. But no... he did not want to step on it, he was afraid of the pain it would cause, and he could hear Voldemort's high, cold laugh...

"Harry!" Ginny shook him awake. "We fell asleep!"

"Sorry," Harry groaned. "Are they okay?"

"I'm sure they are," Ginny said softly. It was early evening, and the first stars were beginning to come out. Ginny performed the spell that

would reveal human presences again. “Three people still,” Ginny said. She yawned. “Merlin, I’m exhausted. That nap was not nearly long enough.”

“Not for me, either,” Harry said.

Still, they both remained vigilant until it was full night. Several pops disturbed the silence of the orchard in which Harry and Ginny sat. They rose to their feet with one fluid motion, and pointed their wands in the direction of whoever had just Apparated.

“Where do you think they are?” Hermione hissed.

“Right here,” Harry said. He lowered his wand.

“You could’ve warned us you were coming here,” Ron said grumpily. “We had no idea where you’d run off to until Dumbledore came to tell us he’d found the wards.”

“Hush, Ron, we were almost certain they were here,” Hermione said.

“Which wards did you choose?” Ginny asked, interested.

“Seven,” Dumbledore said. “They are subtle, as Ron said they should be... but I think they will be even more powerful because of it. Any outright, blatant wards of protection would tell Voldemort what we do not wish him to know – should he chance by the Burrow. Or any of the Death Eaters.”

“He’s come up with a brilliant plan,” Hermione said, and awe colored her voice. “The wards will be laid out every few feet... whoever is trying to enter the Burrow will have to make it through all of them... and each ward will communicate with one another... it’s all very complex.”

It sounded complex, and Harry was not quite sure if he truly understood what either Hermione or Dumbledore were saying. Wards communicating with each other? And what did it matter if they weren’t all in the same location?

Dumbledore seemed to read Harry's mind. "Complex wards – the kind we will be constructing tonight – are almost sentient, like wands. Once someone has passed through the first, certain information will be given to the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh wards. Same with the all the rest. The first, second, third, and fourth are Wards of Intent. If anyone has ill will toward any of the Weasleys, the first will pick up on it. Then, the second will judge if the ill will is directed toward Ron and Ginny, or if it is directed to the other Weasleys, or both. I believe that this will be the one to determine whether or not the person is a Death Eater. The third will then judge the strength of the ill will – for instance, if a Ministry worker who does not particularly care for Arthur approaches, he will not be in immediate danger."

"But will that stop Death Eaters?" Harry asked. "Death Eaters will be pretty hacked off at us, too."

"Which is why I am here," Snape said smoothly. Harry started; he'd had no idea that Snape was with them. "What you may not know is that the Protean Charm that is burned on our skin has created a bond, very similar to the blood bond, between all of the Death Eaters. Dumbledore will be able to create a ward that will stop all those who wear the Dark Mark."

"But if you can do that, why are you bothering with the other wards?" Harry asked.

"Not all of the Dark Lord's followers have the Mark," Snape said. "Fenrir Greyback, for one. I assume you do not wish him to be allowed access to your family home?"

"Definitely not," Ginny said.

"That will be the fourth ward," Dumbledore said. "And the only one that you will not assist me with in the creation. The fifth ward will both compel the Death Eater or other follower of Voldemort to turn back and it will alert Ron and Ginny to the fact that Voldemort had reason to send someone to seek out your parents and brothers. Not even Lord Voldemort will be able to push through this ward."

“What about the sixth and the seventh, though?” Harry asked. He felt slightly confused. It seemed as though they wouldn’t need the last two, if what Dumbledore had said was true.

“The sixth, which will actually be physically located after the first ward, will know if the Death Eater has come calling again,” Dumbledore said. “And the seventh will kill.”

Harry found himself in complete and total agreement with Hermione. Dumbledore’s plan was so brilliant and so cunning that Harry was awed by it. He could tell that Ginny was as well. Even though Harry had strong doubts that any Death Eater would call on the Weasleys, Voldemort may well decide to kill them for the sole purpose of revenge on Ron and Ginny. Harry did not think this would happen anytime soon, if at all, but it did not hurt to be cautious. And Dumbledore’s plan was a masterpiece.

Later, Harry would realize that the hours they spent creating the wards (or watching Dumbledore do it, with brief assistance from Snape, Ron, and Ginny) felt like a ceremony. No one laughed, no one joked (Ron managed to stop the funny, but inappropriate comments from coming out of his mouth), and no one said any more than they had to. Harry stood beside Hermione, and watched the runes go up, flaring and sparkling like the moon and stars, before they faded.

He could not help but notice that he felt as though he was not only protecting the Weasleys, but he was also saying goodbye to his last shred of hope that they would join him.

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Longbottom, Lovegood Found Dead

By Aggie Lafferty

Late last night, the Ministry received an anonymous tip that two bodies had been found at the Lovegood residence. The Aurors immediately went to investigate, and found that this was the truth. The Ministry refuses to comment further, though Bertha Jorkins, new member of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, confirmed

last night that the murders had been perpetrated with the Killing Curse.

The Aurors refuse to mention Harry Potter as yet, though the Daily Prophet would like to mention that we believe that this, too, is the work of Potter. It may even be that he killed them himself, instead of having followers do it (for the article concerning the trial of David Yaxley, and Amycus and Alecko Carrow and the murder of Mr. Ollivander, wandmaker, see page 4). It is no coincidence that the two killed had, in the past, supported Harry Potter. Lucius Malfoy graciously offered another interview, and has this to say: "It is no secret that Potter expects loyalty from his friends; I would not be surprised if Mrs. Longbottom and Mr. Lovegood had refused to continue in their support. My son Draco claims that Potter's little school friends were extremely terrified of him."

Lucius Malfoy offers words of wisdom as always. As we have previously stated (see other issues for articles regarding Ronald and Ginevra Weasley), it may be that they have been coerced into joining Potter against their free will. Their parents have testified to that end. The Daily Prophet would like to add this warning to all witches and wizards: do not attempt to reason with Potter. If you see him, alert the Ministry at once. He has already proven himself skilled with the Imperius Curse; do not give him time to enchant or bewitch.

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Harry was idly wondering if they ought to retaliate against Voldemort by killing all of his Death Eaters, or if they ought to humiliate them in some way. Their plan with the Carrows and Yaxley had worked rather splendidly; they were now in Azkaban. Even though Harry knew they would be liberated when the other Death Eaters were, it still felt rather nice to have them out of the way. For now. The thing holding him back from killing, however, was the truth that Voldemort would attempt to counter his move.

But what would he do? Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione had spent endless hours of discussion on just this topic. It was now the middle of October; Mr. Lovegood and Mrs. Longbottom had been murdered in the beginning of September, and they still had not done anything to

retaliate. *Pettigrew could die*, Harry thought. *Voldemort would not even be surprised*. But fear for the lives of those he loved stayed his hand. He desperately wanted revenge, but he also wanted to protect.

Just the night before, after a long day of tutoring Hermione (although mostly she tutored them), Harry had thrown his hands up in despair, and told Ron that if he could come up with a plan to take out Death Eaters without murdering them, and making them heroes in the eyes of the Ministry, then Ron should let Harry know and they would do it.

"Harry?" Neville's voice came from the mirror that sat on the table. "Harry, are you there?"

Harry leapt up from the couch so fast that he nearly fell over. Neville had only contacted him four times in the last month and a half. "Neville! What is it? Is it that stupid bitch again? Do you need more essence of murtlap?" Neville had contacted him about Umbridge each time, with increasingly nasty news. Umbridge had suspended him and Luna from all Hogsmeade visits; she had forced them into detention, and attempted to force them into telling her where Harry was. Each bit of news had been said in a flat, dead sort of voice that made Harry want to strangle Voldemort and Umbridge with his bare hands.

"No," Neville said. He sounded different... almost excited, and yet afraid of Harry's reaction. "It isn't about Umbridge. I sort of... I sort of made a mistake."

"Well, tell me what it is and I can fix it!" Harry immediately promised. He did not want Neville to think that Harry would be angry at him for anything (barring joining Lord Voldemort).

"No!" Neville said. Harry peered at him closely. The mirror showed him a grief-stricken young man... but he saw a spark of hope in Neville's eyes that pleased Harry very much. He did not believe that Neville could fully recover from the death of his grandmother, but he was healing. "No, I made a mistake, but, Harry... you won't believe what happened!"

Then Neville told him what had been happening at Hogwarts in the last few weeks. Neville had been right; he'd had to repeat himself

several times before Harry actually believed it. Harry rocked back on his heels, holding the mirror very close to his face. He stared at Neville without really seeing him, an internal war taking place in his head.

It'll just put them in danger.

They already are in danger!

But not like this! We saw what he did to Neville's Gran and Luna's dad!

Are we back to the cycle of self-blame and pushing people away? Aren't we too old for that now?

Yes – no! – I don't know...

Just shut up. We already know we have to do this. We should be happy about this!

"All right," Harry blew out a breath. "We'll come tonight. We'll be there."

Neville smiled the first real smile since his grandmother had been murdered. Harry stared at him intently, noticing, as he did so, that Neville actually reminded him a lot of himself after Cedric had died the first time. Harry knew that Neville was angry and resentful toward pretty much everyone (Luna had mentioned this to Ginny several times). But Neville had also been trying to rise above that, obviously. Harry felt absurdly proud of him.

"I've got to tell the others," Harry said.

"Be there at seven-thirty," Neville told him. "I'll need some time to explain a few things."

Ginny, Ron, and Hermione had none of the misgivings that Harry had. All three were doing a victory dance before the words had fully left his mouth. After a few moments, Sirius had abandoned all dignity and joined in, laughing. Harry just stood there, watching them, until Ginny dragged him out and spun him around the floor. It was like having a

breath of fresh air after spending what felt like months in a cave. Despite his worries, Harry's stomach quivered with excitement and gratitude. He had more friends at Hogwarts than he actually thought...

Fifteen minutes before they were told to arrive, Harry and everyone who lived at either Grimmauld Place or the house in Godric's Hollow (except Ollivander) Apparated into the private room in the Hog's Head Inn. Hermione was busily checking over her notes, Ron was bouncing from foot to foot, Ginny was beaming, Moody was still invisible, and Sirius' eyes glinted. *He's always been up for getting students to break the rules*, Harry thought ruefully.

There were quick, sharp footsteps on the stairs, and Albus and Aberforth Dumbledore both appeared. "I have finished explaining to him the reasons why we need to use this room in the pub far more often," Dumbledore said.

"I've agreed," Aberforth said gruffly. "We'll have to put a Privacy Charm – a strong one – on the door. It isn't that unusual for a few of my patrons to want a quiet place to... talk. That's over now, though."

"Thank you, Mr. Dumbledore," Harry said politely. "And, Professor, I didn't expect to see you here—"

"No?" Dumbledore said, surprised. "I thought you might wish to have an extra symbol of authority. And I will also be able to insure that they will not tell this secret. If Umbridge were to hear, it would have ghastly consequences."

"I know," Harry said. "Thank you."

"Let us not keep them waiting," Dumbledore gestured to Ariana's portrait. "It would be extremely impolite to be late."

One by one, they clambered through the portrait hole, and followed the twisting corridor up to Hogwarts and to the Room of Requirement, where Neville had gathered – against all odds – students who had seen what adult wizards had not: flaws in the story presented by the Ministry.

Harry's first impression of the Room of Requirement was that of a wax museum filled with his stunned, frozen classmates. Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnigan, Lavender Brown, Parvati and Padma Patil, Hannah Abbott, Colin and Dennis Creevey, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Ernie MacMillan, and (to Harry's great surprise) Daphne Greengrass stood gaping at him. Neville and Luna stood in front of them, looking rather smug.

"Blimey!" Dean Thomas said as Ron and Ginny followed Harry.

"Hermione?" Lavender said. "We thought your parents had kept... kept you home this year? That's what – I'm so confused."

Comfortable chairs began appearing as Sirius and Dumbledore (and the invisible Moody) climbed in as well. Daphne squeaked, and clapped her hand over her mouth. Harry eyed her, wondering how Neville had thought of approaching a Slytherin. Not that it was a bad thing, but Neville, as a rule, was quite afraid of the snake set.

"So," Harry said. "Er – thanks for thinking that I'm not some mad dark wizard."

"We're not sure about that," Parvati Patil said, her arms crossed. "Neville and Luna's story sounds completely ridiculous."

"And yet you're here, Parvati," Hermione said calmly. "And so are the rest of you."

They all exchanged uncertain glances. "Things just don't make sense," Dean said. "All these articles... most of them don't sound like you. I can see you using the Imperius—"

"Which I did," Harry said solidly. Several of them shrank back; Hannah and Ernie looked fearfully at his wand, as though he were about to start *Imperiusing* all of them.

"But we didn't think ye'd use the *Cruciatus*," Seamus said. "Remember when ye pulled Draco Malfoy out of the way of that hippogriff? And ye got yerself hurt, and ye hate Malfoy."

“And when we heard that Neville’s grandmother and Luna’s dad were killed,” Padma Patil said, “we knew that you’d never do it.”

“We asked Neville about it,” Dean indicated himself and Seamus. “Whether or not he really thought you’d done it, and he sort of screamed at us that it wasn’t you, it was You-Know-Who.”

“We thought he was completely mad,” Seamus said. “But... we thought about it.”

“I *knew* you weren’t evil, Harry!” Colin Creevey said excitedly. “I knew it!”

The conversation disintegrated after that. Everyone was trying to speak over each other, and Harry could hardly hear what anyone was saying. He caught snatches of it – apparently Hannah Abbott still did not quite believe that Voldemort had actually returned; neither did Justin Finch-Fletchley. The only thing that they could all agree upon was that something weird was going on involving Harry and his friends, and they did not believe everything that was printed in the Daily Prophet. Only Daphne Greengrass remained silent and watchful. She stood a bit apart from the rest, as if she was not sure that she was supposed to be here.

Harry took a deep breath, preparing to shout at everyone to just shut up, and he’d give them an explanation, when Daphne stopped him.

“You-Know-Who is back,” she said.

“I thought you said none of the Slytherins were talking about it,” Hannah said rather nastily.

Daphne raised her brow. “They aren’t. But several of them are strutting even more than usual, you know; Draco and his two loser friends, Crabbe and Goyle. Nott. Flint. They’re all acting like they’ve got a great big secret.”

“And it could just be that they’re happy Potter’s been smeared, Slytherin, it doesn’t have to be because You-Know-Who is back,” Hannah persisted.

"You're forgetting, you Hufflepuff moron, that *Professor Dumbledore* is here," Daphne said coldly. "Which means that he probably believes that You-Know-Who is back, and that Harvey here is telling the truth. I'm sorry if that pretty much convinces me."

"Thank you, Miss Greengrass," Dumbledore murmured. His eyes were twinkling. "I do indeed believe that Harry is telling the truth," he added. Everyone listened silently as he spun the same lie that he had told Mr. Ollivander: Harry had contacted him and Dumbledore had listened to him and believed. By the time Dumbledore finished, the audience was gaping at Harry. He thought they might be more impressed by the fact that he had used the Imperius Curse to save Cedric's life than anything else.

"Blimey," Dean said. Seamus whistled.

"Why aren't you telling the Ministry, though?" Ernie MacMillan asked. "Don't you think that everyone ought to know that You-Know-Who is back?"

"The Ministry," Sirius said, "has entered a state of advanced paranoia. Harry could tell all the truth he wanted, until he was blue in the face, but no one would listen."

"But when we all tell them—" Parvati began.

"I am afraid that you will have to keep this conversation a secret," Dumbledore interrupted. "In fact, I'm afraid that I will have to take measures to insure your silence."

"What?" Dean said blankly.

"You can't tell anyone that you saw me," Harry said. "You have to pretend like this conversation never happened."

"But you're innocent!" Justin Finch-Fletchley said indignantly. "The whole school should know—"

"They wouldn't believe it," Ron said implacably. "And you'd just get hauled into Umbridge's office." When everyone exchanged dark looks, Harry suspected that Umbridge's use of a blood quill had not

remained a secret. Luna and Neville both raised their right fists, upon which were the words: *I must not tell lies*.

"And this is just because she thinks we're lying about not knowing where Harry is," Neville said grimly.

"If she knew that you were meeting here tonight, if she even suspected that you had met Harry and believed him, the consequences would be dire," Dumbledore said. "The Ministry is interfering here at Hogwarts, and I can assure you that the Aurors would strenuously question you, despite the fact that you are still children."

"But if *you* said—"

"If I said anything, I would have to follow Harry into hiding," Dumbledore said. "I would not be allowed to remain here, offering what help I can to the students."

"And he would lose any power he had in the Wizengamot," Harry said. "We need him there more than I need him to defend me. The same goes for you."

Hermione pulled out a blank parchment from her bag. "You will all need to sign this," she said firmly. "It will bind you to your promise that this does not leave the room. Neville and Luna won't sign... they've known for a while now that they have to keep this a secret... and if there are more people who begin to suspect something is funny, they'll be able to talk about it."

"But," Ernie said uncertainly, "what will happen if we do say something?"

"You won't be able to," Hermione said. "There's a jinx on this paper that will prevent you from speaking about it. It's a strong Silencing Charm. That's the only jinx, I promise."

Daphne Greengrass was the first to sign. Harry suspected that she knew that she had the most to lose; of all of them, she would be in the most physical danger if word got out that she was on his side.

Colin and Dennis signed, beaming. Ernie and Hannah were the most reluctant, but they added their signatures anyway in the end.

"I have a question for you," Harry said. "Do you want to learn to fight? Do you want to be able to defend yourselves against Voldemort?"

"Of course," Ernie answered promptly. "But Umbridge is completely useless; I don't see how we're going to pass our OWLs with her teaching us."

"That bitch is too afraid of what you'll do with it," Sirius said. "We know that the Ministry is trying to stop you lot from learning spells that can be used in a duel or a fight. They're dead afraid that Harry here will decide to enchant his old school friends... there's nothing they can do about the adults who have already learned these kinds of spells, but they want you lot handicapped as much as possible."

"And you won't have to fumble around with what Umbridge isn't teaching you," Harry added, grinning at the gleeful looks when Sirius called Umbridge a bitch. "We'll teach you ourselves. We'll meet here as often as possible..."

Colin Creevey and his brother looked almost painfully eager. Harry felt a little pang of sadness at how willing they were to learn how to fight. He suspected that one day they would be put to use and Harry wondered how long their innocence would survive in this war. Harry fervently hoped that it would be a long time before they saw thestrals.

Betrayal came swiftly and suddenly from a source unexpected: Neville. "If we're going to learn to fight, we've got to have a proper name, don't we? And I've got the perfect one, since the Ministry's so afraid of it happening: Potter's Army."

Harry gaped at him. Before he could stop it and vehemently refuse to allow them to use his name – it should be *Dumbledore's* Army, for the love of Merlin! – everyone enthusiastically agreed. Harry glared at Ron and Ginny when they whooped and applauded. "No, Neville! I don't think—"

"It's perfect," Neville said stubbornly. "It fits."

Harry eventually had to stop arguing, though only because Ginny threatened to use her Bat-Bogey Hex on him. He still felt rather mutinous and annoyed, however, up until Hannah asked what their first lesson would be.

“Your first lesson—” Harry began, already planning to teach them how to Stun each other. But before he could finish, Moody released his charm.

“CONSTANT VIGILANCE!” he shouted.

Needless to say, it took several more minutes of explanations as to how their professor had come back from the dead before the others were ready to begin.

Potter’s Army, indeed.

Chapter 27 – Be Wary

It was not at all difficult for Moody to arrange events so that when Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione ambushed Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle, the two Death Eaters were together. Harry waited, Disillusioned, in the shadows just outside of the light from the nearest streetlamp. They were in a very quiet suburb of London; the houses were few and far between. The four of them formed a loose square around the two men. Harry watched and waited until he saw the Imperius Curse that Moody had placed them under lift. Their feet stopped shuffling, and the glassy look left their eyes. Before they could process their change in location, Harry sent two quick spells to block their access to their Dark Marks.

“Good evening, Mr. Crabbe,” Harry said pleasantly. He stepped toward them. “Good evening, Mr. Goyle.”

“Potter?” Crabbe said dumbly. “It’s Potter!”

“The Dark Lord will like this,” Goyle grinned.

Harry ducked the Stunning Spells that came his way. “Now, now... there’s no need to be rude.”

“Can’t tell us what to do, Potter,” Crabbe said. “Now, why don’t you come along quietly? You don’t stand a chance against us.”

While Crabbe spoke, Goyle surreptitiously slipped forward. Harry could not help but feel mildly impressed. He had thought that these two were complete idiots; he had even felt slightly disappointed that all the interesting Death Eaters were still in Azkaban. But the two had a sort of primitive – not intelligence; he would never think that about these fools – instinct. They moved like animals on the hunt.

“I’m not afraid of you two morons,” Harry said coldly. He raised his wand.

“Can’t do magic outside of school,” Crabbe said. “Ministry will find you.”

Harry grinned at him. "I'm not afraid of the Trace, either. See... you two, stupid though you are, are adults. I can do all the magic I want around adults, and the Ministry won't have any idea. Isn't that wicked?"

Harry threw up a magical shield so fast that the red light had barely left Goyle's wand. He took a moment to notice that these long months of training with Moody, Sirius, Remus, Tonks, and Dumbledore had improved his skills. He heard a slight sound, and knew that the others had closed in. Two quick swirls of his wand, and Crabbe and Goyle were Disarmed. Harry chuckled at the dumbfounded looks on their faces – Merlin knew that their sons came by it honestly.

When Ginny and Ron revealed themselves, Harry watched with great pleasure as the mean looks slid off the faces of Crabbe and Goyle and were replaced with confusion and fear. They were outnumbered and they knew it. Harry felt an immediate shift in the air pressure, and knew that Hermione had successfully performed the Anti-Apparation Jinx.

"Voldemort," Harry said in a hard voice. Crabbe and Goyle flinched. "Voldemort has successfully turned the entire Wizarding world against me. I have two friends. Their family hates me. He killed two people, and successfully turned my three other friends against me. Unfortunately, I have been given the task of defeating Voldemort. Do not think that just because I'm hated and reviled that I'll give up. I don't care how much the stupid Ministry is willing to pay for me to be caught. I will defeat Voldemort."

Harry allowed himself a small smile when the truth of his message sunk into their thick skulls. He had done what he could to protect Neville and Luna; it would have to be enough for now.

"You can't defeat the Dark Lord, Potter," Goyle said. His face was twisted into an ugly grimace. He looked on the verge of attack, but he was apparently cognizant of the fact that three wands (that he knew of) were pointed at them.

Harry shook his head. "You keep telling me what I can and can't do. I can't fight you – but look! You're Disarmed! I can't do underage

magic”—he exaggeratedly looked around for owls from the Ministry—
“but I don’t see any consequences of it, now do I?”

Crabbe and Goyle appeared to have no answer to this.

“I may be almost alone,” Harry said.

“But he’s got us,” Ron said.

“And if we die,” Ginny added, “we’ll be sure to take Voldemort down with us.”

“Maybe Mum and Dad will figure it out that we’re not evil,” Ron said bitterly. Harry knew that it was only partially an act... and it made it all the more believable.

“I don’t care about Mum and Dad,” Ginny said sharply. “They’re fools who believe anything the effing Ministry tells them.”

“I’m not sure that I’ll even forgive them,” Harry said honestly. He turned back to Crabbe and Goyle, glad that the scripted performance was over. He narrowed his eyes, considering them. He was grimly satisfied to see that Crabbe was trembling – he suspected it was from fear, rather than rage. “I’ve a message for you to take to Voldemort,” Harry said conversationally. “Tell him that you’re the last Death Eaters I meet up with who aren’t going to die. And – believe me – I’m only letting you live so you can be my messengers.”

“Harry,” Ron said. “There are two of them.”

“Only one of them needs to carry the message,” Ginny pointed out. “You could kill one of them right now.”

Harry pretended to think about it. “Don’t be scared, Mr. Goyle,” he said softly. “I couldn’t... imagine killing the fathers of boys I went to school with. Although... I never did like your sons much.”

“They are arseholes,” Ron said agreeably.

“Can’t say I’m surprised,” Ginny said. “Look at who they have for fathers. Death Eaters don’t exactly set the best examples for their children.”

“That’s not fair, Ginny,” Ron said. “We’re about as different from Mum and Dad as possible.”

“Quiet,” Harry said, “while I decide what to do with them.”

He already knew exactly what he was going to do to them. But he did enjoy the sweat that shined on their faces. Goyle’s beady little eyes were darting back and forth from side to side, obviously trying to see a way out. Crabbe kept clenching and unclenching his fist. Harry knew that he was trying to touch his Dark Mark, to summon Voldemort, but that would not happen until Harry was good and ready for it.

First, he snapped their wands. “It’s too bad you Death Eaters decided to kill Mr. Ollivander, isn’t it,” Harry said. “Good luck finding another wandmaker.”

“Y-y-you c-c-c—“

“I can’t?” Harry said. “I’m pretty sure that I just did. Maybe,” he said gently, “you should think before you kill. Although you won’t be killing ever again.” Harry gripped his wand tightly. He searched his own feelings again, wondering if this was the right thing to do. But then he thought about Mr. Lovegood and Mrs. Longbottom, and how they were gone forever. And he thought of how Crabbe and Goyle had laid waste to Muggles and magical folk alike during the height of Voldemort’s powers. He did not feel even a prick of conscience – just regret at the necessity.

“Ready?” he asked Ron, Ginny, and Hermione. He flicked his wand at Goyle and he was bound so tightly that he could not move. He then turned his attention to Crabbe, and said “*Legilimens!*” at the same time as Ron, Ginny, and Hermione.

It was remarkably easy to almost break them, though Harry felt wretched and ill after seeing the foul, evil memories. Goyle had killed a mother and two adolescents, and he had laughed while he had

done it. Crabbe had used the Imperius Curse to rape Muggle women. Goyle had once killed an old man using the Bludgeoning Hex... it had taken minutes for the man to die. He saw death, torture, and rape, and when the four of them brought the Death Eaters to the point of insanity by battering their mental walls with Legilimency, Harry did not feel the slightest bit guilty.

All four of them were breathing rather quickly. Harry trembled with rage... he longed to kill them for what they had done...

"Ron, no!" Ginny said loudly. She was holding Ron back; Harry could tell that Hermione had joined in the efforts. Ron's face was blank with rage as he fought the hold. "We can't kill them!"

Ron tried to shove her off; his face was blank with anger. A large part of Harry wanted nothing more than to help Ron kill them. But something about Ron's lack of control seemed to steady Harry, and he was able to take a step back from his swirling emotions. "*Muffliato!*" Harry said, not wanting Voldemort to view this conversation through his own Legilimency. "We can't kill them, Ron. Ginny's right. They have a message to deliver. Besides, Voldemort will probably kill them once he's done extracting their memories."

Ron looked as though he were about to argue, but he forced himself to calm down. "I hope he does," Ron said savagely.

"They won't be much use to him," Ginny pointed out. "Besides, one more use of Legilimency, and they'll be completely insane. I can't imagine any of the other Death Eaters caring for them, or sending them to St. Mungo's. After what we've just seen, their wives almost certainly won't lift a finger to help."

Ron's nostrils flared, and he paced, still breathing quite heavily. "They – make – me – sick," he growled.

"You're not alone," Harry said quietly. He stared down at the two Death Eaters. Their eyes were open and staring – they were not dead, but they were on the brink of insanity. Neither of them had ever learned anything more than rudimentary Occlumency. Even Harry, who was not nearly as skilled at Legilimency as Moody, Snape, or Dumbledore, had been able to batter through them on his second try.

It had, however, taken all four of them to destroy the minds of Crabbe and Goyle.

Certainly effective, Harry thought, but I'm not sure if I want to repeat the experience.

"Take the wards down," Harry said to Hermione. "And grab Ron. We need to be ready to get out of here the moment those Dark Marks are touched. Actually... you could just leave now."

"We'll leave when you do, Harry," Ginny said firmly.

"Fine," Harry muttered. He pointed his wand at the Death Eaters. "*Imperio!*"

He only waited a moment after forcing Crabbe to touch his Dark Mark before turning on the spot and Apparating away from the quiet street to Grimmauld Place. Ginny, Ron, and Hermione had arrived the instant before he had. It was, Harry noted, glancing at the grandfather clock, already past two in the morning, and he was dead tired. But Sirius was waiting for them in the kitchen, and Dumbledore was probably there as well. He sighed, thinking longingly of a bed, and turned to walk down to the basement.

He knew the instant that Voldemort had used Legilimency on Crabbe and Goyle, because he fell heavily against the wall. His scar burned like fire, and he in his veins pounded a rage that was not his own. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing the moment to pass. Ginny threw his arm over her shoulders, and helped him to stand upright.

"Thanks," Harry murmured.

"Always," said Ginny.

"Crabbe and Goyle have been broken," Harry announced, walking into the kitchen. Sirius, Remus, Moody, Tonks, and Dumbledore looked up. Snape did not react; Harry knew that Snape, who had devised this plan, had expected no less. "And Voldemort's found them already. I think it's safe to say that he got the message."

"We made it quite obvious that we're alone in this," Ginny said.

“So what do we do now?” Ron asked. “I mean, after we sleep for a while. Do we wait for him to make another move? Who d’you think he’ll go after?”

“I am not sure that he will go after anyone just yet,” said Dumbledore. “I think that he will now redouble his efforts to obtain the prophecy.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “That’s what I thought, too.”

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry should have expected it; he should have realized that some things were probably just fated to happen, no matter what else had changed.

All was quiet for nearly a month, though the tension at Grimmauld Place ran high. Harry felt as though his nerves had stretched almost to the breaking point, and he knew that the others felt the same way. He thanked Merlin for Dumbledore’s Army (he refused to think of it as Potter’s Army), and the outlet for release it offered. The students were coming along at almost a breakneck pace; Harry supposed that it had something to do with the way Moody prowled around, yelling at them.

The members of Potter’s Army did not resent this; in fact, they embraced it. They read the *Daily Prophet* and they knew that people were disappearing. They knew the truth; they knew that Voldemort was prowling the shadows and murdering those who would oppose him. He was blackmailing and jinxing people into following him. At least once a week, Harry found evidence of Voldemort in the pages of the *Daily Prophet*, and the students were just as aware.

Sometimes, particularly after a long day of training with Moody, Harry startled awake in the middle of the night, certain that he had heard someone shout “CONSTANT VIGILANCE!” in his ear. Still, he found that he could not complain. With Hermione constantly forcing him to learn more and more new hexes and curses, and Moody relentlessly teaching him how to move quickly and decisively, Harry could not help but feel slightly astonished at the rate he improved.

He wasn't the only one. All the underage members of the Army were – and that included Ginny, Ron, and Hermione. After their thrice-weekly sessions, Harry generally glowed with pride and awe.

“Great job, Neville!” Ron said enthusiastically during the second to last meeting before Christmas. Neville had successfully mastered the spell that caused quicksand to appear beneath the victim's feet. Harry beamed at him; it was a tough spell.

“I'll bet Luna could do it too,” Harry said. “Where is Luna, anyway?” He craned his neck, thinking she might have arrived after they started practicing, and Harry simply hadn't noticed her.

“She's not feeling well,” Neville said. “Told me earlier that she wouldn't be here tonight.”

“I hope she's all right,” Hermione said worriedly. “Tell her that if she doesn't feel better soon, she needs to go see Madam Pomfrey... I know she doesn't always think about stuff like that...”

“I don't think she's physically ill,” Neville said stiffly. Harry knew why. Neville had barely even mentioned the murder of his grandmother since it had happened, and if Luna was grieving for her dad – entirely understandable, as Christmas was swiftly approaching – Neville was probably uncomfortable with stating that plainly. He obviously did not want any of them to mention Augusta Longbottom's death.

“Ah,” Harry said, glancing away from Neville, and feeling more than a little uncomfortable, himself. “Well, I'll probably see her next time... we've got a gift for her – and you...”

But Luna was not there at the next meeting either and they could not deliver the book of odd creatures (written as a collaborative effort between Newt Scamander and his grandson, Rolf) Hermione had found for her while browsing through a catalogue. Harry grimaced. He did not want Luna to feel like she was alone in her grief. He wanted to be there for her.

Harry pulled his copy of the Marauder's Map out of the pocket of his robes and opened it up. He stared at it, searching for Luna's dot.

“Hey, Ginny? Could you look for Luna on here?” he said in a low voice. “I think she’s grieving for her dad.”

Ginny scanned it, though she was somewhat distracted by the fact that the other students were flying up into the air as if dangled by invisible hooks around her. “Good job, Dean!” she said loudly. “I’m looking, Harry, but I don’t—“

“Harry, it’s almost nine,” Hermione warned.

Harry blew the whistle that ended the session. “Well done, everyone,” he said. “You’ve come so far in such a small amount of time... frankly, I’m amazed. We’ll pick right back up after the holidays...”

“Merry Christmas, Harry!” Seamus said loudly. There were loud choruses of Merry Christmas. The students filed out of the room in twos and threes, and Dumbledore, Sirius and Moody left to meet Remus and Tonks for a drink in the private room at the Hog’s Head Inn.

“Why were you looking for Luna, Harry?” Ginny asked.

“Oh... Neville said on Monday that she was having a hard time about her dad,” Harry said. “I was going to try to talk to her... or maybe deploy Hermione and you to do it for me. I don’t like the idea of her crying all by herself.”

“Everyone deals with grief differently, Harry,” Hermione said gently. “I think it’s possible that Luna just needs privacy.”

“I suppose,” Harry said.

Harry did not think that any of them (except, perhaps, Sirius) were looking forward to this Christmas. Ginny grew paler and more thoughtful the closer they came to the holiday. Ron grew more irritable, and he and Hermione took to snapping at each other to relieve their tension. Privately, Harry thought that they could do a lot more good for each other if they just made love, but he had never pretended to understand their relationship.

Four days before Christmas, Harry yawned widely and shoved away the *Evening Prophet*. The news had had nothing to say about what had happened to Crabbe and Goyle. Harry suspected that whatever had been done to them had been done quietly. *Good*, Harry thought. *One less complication with the Ministry*. He shoved his chair back from the table, said goodnight to Moody and Remus, and Flooed back over to the house in Godric's Hollow.

Ginny was toweling her hair dry when Harry entered their room. "I just talked to Luna," she said sleepily. "She says she's doing all right. I told her that we're here for her if we need her."

Harry pulled off his robes and, wearing only boxers, slipped underneath the bedclothes. A naked Ginny joined him, and he wrapped his arms around her and nuzzled her hair. "Good night, bright eyes," he said. He closed his eyes, and made certain that his Obfuscomency shield was as strong as he could make it. He did not think that Voldemort would attempt to gain the prophecy this night... but it was possible that Voldemort could decide to send Nagini a day earlier than last time.

"Good night, Harry," sighed Ginny.

Harry drifted off to sleep, feeling quite warm and pleasant. He smiled while he slept; he had peaceful dreams for once... Ginny was laughing, and everyone in Potter's – *Dumbledore's* – Army had joined them on a picnic in the Forest of Dean. Daphne Greengrass claimed that she was the Queen of Slytherin, and Harry thought that was so true and yet so hilarious at the same time.

And then he was a snake, gliding across the floor toward a door. A red-haired man slept against it, head drooping and mouth slightly open. The snake (Harry) stopped and eyed him warily. Nagini was not supposed to deviate from what she was supposed to do... she was not here to kill this man...

The red-haired man grunted, and woke with a start. Nagini did not give him time to react or to grab the stick that made magic, so she attacked. Her jaws locked onto him once... twice... and once more. The man was screaming, and then he was still...

Harry pulled himself out of the vision with immense effort. He sat up... Ginny had her hand on his shoulder, and her eyes were wide with fright. For a moment, he just stared at her. Then he leapt from the bed. He was already turning on the spot when he said, "your dad," and Disapparated.

He thanked Merlin that the Ministry was not yet so paranoid that they had blocked all Apparation from the outside. Harry was just fifteen years old, after all, and he could not be expected to know how to Apparate... The Atrium was completely deserted, for which Harry was extremely grateful. The ground flew by beneath his feet, and his arms pumped as he sprinted to the elevator.

While the lift moved with inexorable slowness, Harry realized that he still wore only his underwear. He grimaced, pulled them off, and transfigured them into robes. They were scratchy and tight, but they covered him much better than his underwear had. *Now is not the time to be modest*, Harry told himself firmly. Still, he felt more comfortable in the robes.

The lift doors opened and Harry sprinted out of them and down the corridor. He could see the snake... and he could see Arthur Weasley lying in a pool of his own blood. He was still meters away when he sent the Bludgeoning Hex at Nagini. She was in constant, writhing motion, and the spell missed her. So did the next, and the next. Frustrated, Harry whispered "*Avada Kedavra*." But the fact that she was also a living vessel for a Horcrux protected her, as he had known it would. Nagini would never allow herself to be sacrificed so that Voldemort might be defeated...

"*Stop. I command it*," Harry told her in Parseltongue. He dared not look down at Arthur any more than he had... Voldemort was watching... he could not let him know that he cared. "*Stay away from the prophecy*."

"*I do not obey you*," Nagini hissed.

Harry raised his wand, and brought it crashing down with a force that sent the snake flying several feet. "*Sssomeone will hear that*," Harry smiled. "*I've just set off the wards*."

Harry circled her warily. She still did not attempt to escape, nor did she attempt to retrieve the prophecy. He slipped a little in Mr. Weasley's blood. He stared down at the red-haired man; he did not look well. Harry would have to leave and take him to St. Mungo's... anger battled with his conscience. It was stupid and useless, but Harry suddenly hated everything about the man, including the way he was bleeding to death, and could not do anything to save himself. And because of that (Harry ignored the fact that he could not kill Nagini this night anyway), Harry would have to let a Horcrux go free...

He watched, nostrils flaring, when Nagini slithered away... called back to her master... he sent a Blasting Hex and a Bludgeoning Hex after her, and felt a little better when he saw it hurt her. Pieces of the floor were gouged away. The otherwise silent corridor sounded as if it were being attacked by a demolition crew. Harry practically screamed the curses, wanting to make her bleed, yet not wanting to tip off Voldemort that he was attacking Horcruxes... they had not yet replaced the locket in the potion...

Harry knelt, staring at the wound. He had little knowledge of healing, but he knew that it was dangerous for him to move Mr. Weasley without at least attempting to staunch the blood. Harry wished he could remember the spell Snape had used long ago when Harry had attacked Draco Malfoy with *Sectumsempra*. But he could not... He must work quickly, before he was joined by Aurors.

"*Skepey*," Harry said. It was a very weak spell meant to stop paper cuts and the like. But Harry thought that the wound had closed a little. He siphoned off most of the blood and stared, aghast, at the deep wound and the crushed ribs. "*Skepey! Skepey! Skepey!*"

He was just about to take Mr. Weasley to St. Mungo's (hoping that he had been able to do enough), when several things happened at once. His only warning was a quiet shuffle, and a deep voice said "*Stupefy!*"

Harry had no time to raise his wand to defend himself. The red light arced toward him from Kingsley Shacklebolt's wand—

And someone shouted "*Protego!*" and the Shield Charm blossomed in front of Harry, who felt deep confusion. He did not know that voice. It

was not any member of the Order of the Phoenix, not even those such as Dedalus Diggle or Hestia Jones, who did not know the full secret. It was, in fact, like no other voice he had heard before... Harry could not even tell if it was male or female, as if it had been magically disguised. Before he could react, something tumbled in the air and struck Harry on the shoulder and bounced away. A small hourglass—

Harry took his eyes from it with effort. “Kingsley,” he said. “Listen – Arthur Weasley is badly hurt... a giant snake got him. We need to get him to St. Mungo’s.”

Kingsley did not answer, but kept his wand pointed straight at Harry’s head. As soon as the Shield Charm fell, Harry would be Stunned, and it would be over... everything would be over. Harry did not think he would survive the trip to Azkaban... not with Lucius Malfoy as politically powerful as he was.

“Kingsley,” Harry said desperately. “If there’s anything – anything at all that makes you think maybe this situation is not what you think... if you have doubts about anything... help me get Arthur Weasley to St. Mungo’s, and I’ll tell you everything.”

They stared at each other for long moments. Harry became increasingly aware that the spell he had used was failing, and Mr. Weasley was bleeding as heavily as before. Kingsley appeared to be searching for something... anything. He furrowed his brow – and lowered his wand.

“Get the Aurors here,” Harry said. “The watch needs to stay. That prophecy has got to be guarded.”

“But—“

Harry gestured at Mr. Weasley. “No time.”

“I’m not sure I trust you,” Kingsley said.

“But you do,” Harry said. “Just a little, but that’s enough.”

“Give me your wand,” Kingsley said.

Harry considered him. They needed to get to St. Mungo's; Kingsley was not firing hexes at him, but the Auror was still wary. Harry did not like the idea of handing over his only weapon, but Kingsley was honorable, and he had already extended his trust... He handed it over, grimacing. Kingsley looked stunned; and he frowned at Harry's wand and pocketed it.

"Er—" Harry said. "How are we going to get to St. Mungo's? Head up to the Atrium and Apparate there?"

"Hold on a moment," Kingsley said distractedly. He pulled out what looked like a silver pocket watch. He tapped out a message, and it flared brightly. "I'm alerting Scrimgeour and the others. And no, I'm a senior member of the Auror Department; I can Apparate all of us from here."

"Will you Disillusion me?" Harry asked. Kingsley stepped toward him and with one hand, gripped Harry's shoulder, and with the other, tapped Harry's head with his wand. Harry felt the cold, trickling sensation spread from his head down his body.

"Don't think of disappearing," Kingsley said, though he did not seem to think that Harry actually would. "I've got you. Reach down and grab Arthur."

Harry reached for his wife's father; as he did so, he noticed the hourglass that had hit him. He grabbed that as well. A second after he had Mr. Weasley's shoulder in a tight grip, Kingsley whirled them away into crushing darkness. Before Harry even had time to blink at the quiet street outside the perpetually closed department store (which was actually the hospital for witches and wizards in Britain), Kingsley hit him with the Body-Bind Curse, and propped Harry up against the wall.

Stupid! Harry thought angrily, cursing himself. *You just had to blindly trust him, didn't you? Just because he's Kingsley doesn't mean he's an ally. But... why did he take me with him? He could have disabled me before he left. I could be already sitting in front of Scrimgeour and Fudge... the dementors could be on their way...* These rather circular thoughts of self-anger and confusion kept him company for the long minutes that he was alone.

Kingsley returned after an absence of maybe twenty minutes. "Talk, Potter."

"Not here," Harry hissed. "It isn't safe here."

"If you think I'm going to let you lead me into a trap—" Kingsley began.

"Not a trap," Harry said. "I'll make any kind of vow you want; I wouldn't trap you. Listen, Apparate us to 7 Skyview Lane, Godric's Hollow."

Kingsley considered this. He pulled out that silver pocket watch again. "See this?" he said. "This allows me to communicate instantly with Scrimgeour and the other senior members of the Auror Department. All I have to do is tap it with my wand. If you attempt to ambush or threaten me in any way, I *will* send this message, and I will give them your location."

Harry decided not to tell Kingsley that Sirius' house was protected with the Fidelius Charm, and the Aurors would be completely incapable of finding Harry. Instead, he nodded. Kingsley gripped his arm again, turned on the spot, and moments later, he and Kingsley stood in front of Sirius' house. Harry grimaced when he saw that it blazed with light, and he heard voices shouting.

"Walk in front of me, Potter," Kingsley said. He seemed completely stoic, as if the fact that Harry had a houseful of concerned allies did not surprise him one bit. Harry admired that; Merlin knew that he had to work on appearing emotionless – it was not for nothing that he had difficulties with Occlumency.

"They aren't going to hurt you," Harry said. "In fact, I reckon that everyone will be so happy to see you that they'll forget to be angry with me."

Kingsley didn't reply. He marched behind Harry and up the walk and to the door.

"I DON'T CARE WHAT HE SAYS! HARRY COULD BE IN DANGER!" Ginny shouted.

“—the Aurors. We’re on alert, according to Scrimgeour,” Tonks said. Kingsley stiffened. “We would know if—”

“OR HE’S ALREADY *DEAD!*” bellowed Ron.

Harry pushed open the door, bracing himself for the explosion that would come. “Hi, everyone. Look who I brought with me! Arthur’s all right, by the way. He’s in St. Mungo’s. Voldemort didn’t get the prophecy.”

Ginny and Ron spun around in the foyer; they were completely furious. Harry repressed the urge to take a large step back, escape, and hide out until their anger ran its course. Right now they were yelling at Tonks, but in about three seconds they would have a new target: Harry. Sirius, Remus, Tonks, and Hermione stood together – all in their night things – some distance apart from Ginny and Ron.

“Look!” Harry said again, when the silence became too uncomfortable. “I brought Kingsley with me.”

“Nymphadora Tonks,” Kingsley said. “What in Merlin’s name are you doing here?”

“Doing my best to help this lot defeat Voldemort,” Tonks said. “And don’t call me Nymphadora.”

“So it’s true?” Kingsley asked. Harry studied him carefully; he looked unwell, but he did not appear shocked. “You-Know-Who is back?”

One by one, everyone nodded. Kingsley sat down on the sofa, still clutching two wands in his fist. “I’ve thought this might be the case for a while...” he said softly, as though speaking to himself. “Death Eaters who escaped Azkaban at the end of last year suddenly congregating again... Yaxley and the Carrows having Dark Marks... Scrimgeour and Fudge were so certain it was you, Potter. But it didn’t make sense.”

“Good to know that my protégée isn’t a booby like everyone else at the Ministry,” Moody growled. Kingsley gaped at him. “Don’t look at me like that, Shackbolt. A mad Death Eater was impersonating me last year. He’s the one dead, not me.”

“How – but...” Kingsley stammered. “What in Merlin’s name is going on?”

“Will someone tell Dumbledore that we need his Pensieve?” Harry grinned.

Some three hours later, Kingsley emerged from the Pensieve, ashen-faced and blinking rather abruptly. Harry, who had spent the last hour being lectured by everyone else that he was not to ever do what he just did again, was extremely relieved to see him return. Ginny glowered at him. She had not accepted his explanation for leaving her behind – she seemed to think that he shouldn’t have cared that she’d been naked.

“Did you want your father to die?” Harry finally said loudly.

“No,” Ron said immediately. “Don’t try to turn this around on us. You just left; you didn’t say anything to anyone.”

“I didn’t have time!” Harry said.

“It’s true,” Ginny said reluctantly. “He didn’t even pull on his robes. That isn’t a bad transfiguration job, Harry.”

“Thanks,” Harry said. “Listen, nothing bad happened. Your dad’s all right. Voldemort didn’t get the prophecy. *And* he hasn’t figured out that I can see into his mind. *And* the Aurors will likely double the security, so Voldemort will think twice about going to get it until we’re ready for him to try. *And* Kingsley found out. So tell me – did I fail completely?”

“You know you didn’t,” Ron flared up immediately. “But you’ve got to stop running off by yourself. You aren’t alone, Harry!”

“I know,” Harry said sharply. “*I know* that I’m not alone. I’m *sorry* if I thought it best to get there as quickly as possible. And if you were that worried, you could’ve joined me. You don’t need an engraved invitation, Ron!”

“Thanks, I wondered about that,” Ron said sarcastically. “We didn’t exactly know where you were. We knew it wasn’t the Burrow, but—“

"But you weren't expecting it to happen again," Harry said in a more subdued voice.

"Do they always do this?" Kingsley asked Tonks.

"Usually only when they've been drinking," Tonks replied. "Though they've been having a bit of a rough time the last month."

"We're sitting right here!" Ron and Harry said in unison.

Hermione snorted, and Ginny hid a smile.

"Harry, Ron," Remus said, "I'm sure that Kingsley has quite a few questions for all of us... perhaps we could wait until later to keep fighting?"

They all answered probing questions until dawn. There was a rosy glow that did not come from the lamps, which had remained lit through the night, but from the lightening sky. Harry was barely able to keep his eyes propped open, and his voice was starting to slur. He knew that Ron felt the same exhaustion, and neither would have the energy to carry on their argument. He glanced over at him; Ron and Hermione were sitting together in an armchair. Harry met Ron's eyes, and Ron gave half a shrug and a grimace that Harry took to mean: *I forgive you, but I'll pound you if you do it again.*

"So which of you were helping Harry tonight?" Kingsley asked.

Harry bolted upright, cursing himself for being so stupid. But with Kingsley and Arthur... he'd completely forgotten his mysterious benefactor. "It wasn't any of them," Harry said. He turned to Dumbledore. "Professor—"

"—Harry, we have gone through this any number of times," Dumbledore said. "You are no longer one of my students. You are to call me by my first name."

"Sorry, A-Albus," Harry found it quite as difficult to be familiar with Dumbledore as others did saying Voldemort's name. "Kingsley was about to *Stupefy* me, and someone threw up a Shield Charm. I

couldn't tell who it was – whoever it was had a very good disguise. I couldn't even tell if it was a man or a woman.”

Everyone gaped at him. “Harry – you're serious?” Sirius asked.

“Yes,” Harry said. “And whoever it was threw this at me,” Harry pulled the hourglass out of the pocket of his robes. On closer inspection, he realized that his original perception of the object was correct.

“But, Harry!” Hermione said. “That's a Time-Turner!”

“What the—“

“What in the name of Merlin's left nut does that mean?” Ron asked loudly.

Harry met Dumbledore's eyes. There was no hint of the familiar twinkle, only evidence that the intelligent brain behind them was working very hard. Harry waited. He did not expect the older wizard to know what this meant, but he trusted Dumbledore's guesses more than almost anyone else's certainty.

“I think,” Dumbledore said slowly, “there is someone else who knows about the time travel.”

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Author's Note:

Hmm... theories, anyone?

Also, I foresee questions regarding Nagini. I've thought (since I read the book) that Horcruxes have protections against damage; it would take something like Fiendfyre, basilisk fangs, or the Sword of Gryffindor to destroy her. Harry assumes that Voldemort knows this, and would be suspicious of Harry going after her with one of those things. Harry does not want Voldemort to know that he knows about the Horcruxes. And, yes, he intends to get rid of the cup before he tackles Nagini.

Again... I suspect that people will wonder why Arthur was attacked. The Ministry, as I've stated a few times, has been using its people to guard the door. But how was it that Arthur just so happened to be there? That will be answered in a later chapter. And no, it doesn't have anything to do with him knowing about the time travel.

As requested by a reviewer (and I can see why this is a question), I will now attempt to explain why Fudge is being stupid about training the kids to defend themselves. The Ministry is deeply concerned by the fact that Ginny and Ron left to be with Harry; they do not want to risk other friends of Harry's learning combat. I don't really think it's that much of a stretch – Ministry paranoia and poor decision-making skills are major themes in the original works. I know I should have explained this more clearly in the last chapter... When I go back and heavily edit this story, I imagine that will change somewhat.

*Also, I would like to thank my new betas, Simon and Jack. Er – sorry I'm a bit short on self-control. And for those who like stories like this, Jack's (penname Worldmaker) new story *Furious Angels* is already fabulous.*

Chapter 28 – Execution

HARRY POTTER INFILTRATES THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

By Aggie Lafferty

Late Thursday night, Harry Potter was seen attempting to break into the Department of Mysteries and retrieve the prophecy protected there. “It was only a matter of time,” Albus Dumbledore said. Indeed, he had set the watch on it the moment it became clear that Potter is a dark wizard on the level with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. “We are only lucky that Potter was interrupted by Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt.”

The Auror Department has only given the Daily Prophet the barest of details. At approximately eleven-thirty at night, the wards indicating intrusive use of magic in the corridor leading to the Department of Mysteries flared up. Shacklebolt was the first Auror on the scene. “Yes, I saw Potter, all right,” Shacklebolt said. “I chased him down and caught him just as he Apparated away – yes, he knows how to Apparate – and I almost contained him before he shook me off and left.” We at the Daily Prophet would like to commend Shacklebolt’s bravery in following Potter alone.

There was only one injury. Arthur Weasley (for a review of the disappearance of his youngest children, see page 7) was admitted to St. Mungo’s at eleven forty-three and treated for a rather serious snake bite. As it is not secret that the Ministry is requiring the door to the Department of Mysteries to be guarded by all members, the Daily Prophet is convinced that Weasley received his injuries during Harry Potter’s attempt to discover his terrible power. Weasley is unavailable for comment.

The Room of Requirement buzzed with questions and speculation, and Harry could hear it halfway down the steep corridor that connected Hogwarts to the Hog’s Head Inn. The Christmas holidays were over, and the members of Potter’s Army were eager to resume their thrice-weekly training; they were so eager, in fact, that classes had not even begun yet. Harry, however, suspected that the others were not speaking about new spells.

“Harry! Is it true?” Hannah Abbott asked excitedly. “Did you really go to the Ministry of Magic?”

“He did,” Ron confirmed. “Voldemort – oh for the love of Merlin, are we going to have to sit in a circle and practice saying the name again? – was trying to get to the prophecy.”

“How did you know?” Seamus asked.

Harry paused. He could not tell the truth; that would only lead to uncomfortable questions. Harry trusted all of them a great deal and he knew that they would not betray him; but Harry knew that the truth could be more of a burden than anyone suspected. Likewise, he could not claim that he had a spy in Voldemort’s camp. “We had someone watching,” Harry finally said. *Yeah, me, because I’m a Horcrux and I can see inside Voldemort’s mind.*

“Ron, Ginny, was it your dad?” Lavender Brown asked. “Is he really working with you, and just pretending that he’s not?”

Harry clenched his jaw. “No. The Weasleys are most certainly not working with us.” Rage curdled in his stomach. Mrs. Weasley had not even bothered sending Christmas sweaters to Ron and Ginny. She’d apparently written them off... like they weren’t even her children anymore. It filled him with a fury so intense that it frightened him a little. His exile from the Burrow had broken his heart, but seeing Ron and Ginny so hurt and heart-broken themselves felt like a *Sectumsempra* to the kidneys.

“Oh – er – sorry,” Lavender said in a small voice.

“Just don’t mention them again in front of him,” Ron jerked his thumb at Harry.

“That would probably be wise,” Dumbledore agreed.

“Let’s get to work,” Harry said shortly. “Get into pairs, everyone. We aren’t going to learn anything new tonight. Instead we’re going to duel each other with what we know. Last man – or woman – standing is the winner.” He turned automatically to face Ginny, but his eyes caught on Dumbledore. He crooked his finger at Harry.

"It is time," Dumbledore said, "for us to duel."

"I won't stand a chance," Harry said immediately.

Dumbledore cocked his head. "Certainly not with that attitude, Harry. You knew this day would come sooner or later. You knew that you would have to test your skills against me before you face Voldemort."

Harry supposed that he had known that he would duel with Dumbledore. He'd watched him carefully during the times the headmaster was able to assist with training the students, and he'd listened attentively to what Dumbledore had to teach. He'd just thought that he'd have a while longer... perhaps in a few years it would not be quite so humiliating. As it was now, Harry gave himself about thirty seconds.

"Before we begin," Dumbledore said, "I would like for you to practice Occlumency – rid yourself of your anger toward the Weasleys. Anger only has a place in a duel between fools."

Harry closed his eyes, and determinedly trapped the swirling, giddy rage and pain that constituted his feelings for Ginny's and Ron's mother and father. He locked them away, for now, and gathered his thoughts, already desperately wondering how he would not make a complete arse of himself in front of pretty much everyone he loved.

"All right," he said finally. He pretended not to notice that no one had moved. He'd much rather duel Dumbledore without an audience... and Dumbledore not only had age and immense skill, he had the Elder Wand! He stared at the wand in question and felt slightly ill.

They bowed to each other... and something funny happened. Harry felt his eyes shift behind his glasses, and it was almost as though he was facing someone he did not know. He only vaguely realized that it was Albus Dumbledore he faced...

Dumbledore threw the first spell, and Harry brought up a Shield Charm so quickly that the older wizard had to duck his own rebounding curse. Harry leaned to the right, pointed his wand, and jerked it upward, saying "*Levicorpus!*" inside his head. Dumbledore's

foot caught, but there was a bang and despite the fact that the spell had hit, he remained on his own two feet.

Harry sent two more mild hexes at Dumbledore in quick succession, both of which the other wizard dodged.

“ARE YOU A SCHOOLBOY PLAYING LITTLE TRICKS?” Moody roared. “GO AFTER HIM, POTTER!”

Indignant, Harry raised his wand and sent three *Rictumsempras* at Dumbledore, who easily countered them Shield Charms. Then, in one swift motion, he pointed his wand at the floor beneath Dumbledore’s feet and turned it into quicksand. The next second, he sent a hex that caused the rapidly sinking wizard to double over coughing. Harry thought quickly; Dumbledore would surely counter this... how could he, Harry, disable him long enough to win the duel?

Dumbledore’s next hex hit Harry on the left arm, and he found himself spinning through the air in an out of control spiral. Harry whispered the Cushioning Charm, and as soon as he landed on his bum, he cast the spell that would turn Dumbledore to smoke. It only partially worked. Harry had hit Dumbledore in the left leg... and only that leg turned insubstantial...

Harry dove under an arc of orange light and threw up a Shield Charm to protect himself from the other. He rolled to the side, aimed a Blasting Hex that would destroy the ground in front of Dumbledore and obscure his vision for a moment. He took that opportunity to leap to his feet—

And he was thrown backward by a Bludgeoning Hex that hurt Harry’s shoulder quite a lot. He grimaced, threw up a Shield Charm, and stood up again. *What did Dumbledore do when he dueled with Voldemort at the Ministry?* Harry took a split second to look around the room. He spied the cushions Potter’s Army generally used to soften landings, levitated one of them, and blew it apart right over Dumbledore’s head. He tried to use that advantage, but Dumbledore was too fast and Harry found himself unable to move his legs.

“*Protego!*” Harry shouted. “*Finite Incantatem!*” As soon as he could move again, he danced out of the way of another jinx. He felt a tiny

surge of pride... he'd lasted far longer than he had expected to. "*Incendiarmus!*" A whip made of flames issued from Harry's wand, and circled Dumbledore like a glowing lasso.

It was that moment that changed the duel. They had mostly been using relatively harmless jinxes and mild hexes, but Harry's use of a curse that could potentially hurt Dumbledore took it to another level. Harry found himself dodging not only Body-Bind Curses, but a sickly purple spell that burned Harry's left hand rather severely and caused it to swell to twice its normal size. Harry did not know how long it actually lasted, only that toward the end he was stumbling with exhaustion, and it was with relief that he succumbed to the malignant black ropes that stung and trapped him.

"You win," Harry croaked. He was trembling and his entire body was coated with sweat. The ropes immediately disappeared. Dumbledore tapped his wand against Harry's hand, and it stopped throbbing.

"That was truly excellent, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Your skills have grown immensely over the past year."

"When we do this again," Harry said, "will you teach me how to beat you?"

Dumbledore laughed. "I will try, though I think you only need more practice... perhaps a larger repertoire, though I believe Hermione is helping you with that?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "And I definitely need to work on breaking hexes." He paused, and then lowered his voice. "Usually, I fight to the death, you know. No way to counter that."

"Practice everyday," Dumbledore advised. "And whenever you come to teach Potter's Army, I will duel you. Come the time to set the pretty trap, you will be ready to face Voldemort long enough to achieve our aims."

Harry nodded. He looked around, noticing for the first time that everyone in the room – excluding Moody – was gaping at him. Even Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, and Sirius, all of whom knew very well that he was not actually a fifteen year old, looked far too

awed and impressed. Harry could not deny, however, that he felt no small measure of pride that he had held his own against *Dumbledore* for entire *minutes*.

"Blimey, Harry," Dean grinned at him. "Is that what you're teaching us to do?"

"If I can do it, you can," Harry said.

"Very good, King Arthur," Luna said in a dreamy voice.

Harry gazed at her, eyes slightly narrowed. After Dumbledore had made his announcement that he suspected that someone else knew about the time travel, Harry had thought it might be his dreamy, other-worldly friend. Not that he thought she would ever betray them in a million years. Luna never would... but Luna was known for her absolute honesty and bluntness. If, perhaps, her father had asked her point-blank whether or not Harry, Ron, and Ginny were time travelers, she would have told him. And Xeno might have told someone else before he had been murdered... it would explain the fact that he had supported Harry, despite the fact that Harry had only met him once...

He opened his mouth to ask her, but she drifted away to practice against Neville before he could. He thought of following her, but he did not know precisely what he wanted to say. He would have to assure her that even if she did, he had full faith in her, but she mustn't do it again. Perhaps if she *had* told her father, she also might know who it had been. Harry wanted to thank whoever it was, for he was certain that they were on his side...

"All right, Harry?" Colin Creevey asked, beaming up at him. "That was some duel! It was really something!"

"Thanks, Colin," Harry said. "Have you been practicing your Stunning Spell? I noticed last time that you could work on your aim... there's a trick to it, you know; it's in the way you hold your wand."

Harry helped Colin grasp his wand to maximize the power of Stunning Spells. He then demonstrated (in slow motion) how Shield Charms could be used both offensively and defensively to Padma, Parvati, and Daphne. Hannah and Ernie called him over to have him

explain how *Sectumsempra* could be used to different effects. By the time the bell clanged, signaling that the students had to be in their common rooms in half an hour, Harry had decided that he would wait to talk to Luna.

The students slowly began to drift away until only Neville was left. He shuffled his feet and stared around the room so much that Harry thought he might have something important to say. So Harry waited patiently.

Ron was less patient. “Spit it out, Neville!”

Neville grimaced and lifted his chin. “I need more essence of murtlap,” he said. Harry scowled. “And if you could ask Snape... I think I need an antidote to Truth Serum. She called me into her office over the holidays, and I think she tried to get me to talk. But I got real suspicious – she hates me, what was she doing offering me tea and biscuits? So I didn’t drink it... but I don’t think I can trick her any longer.”

Harry, Ron, and Ginny exchanged looks of deep loathing that they reserved solely for Voldemort, Bellatrix Lestrange, Peter Pettigrew, and Umbridge. “I’ll tell Snape you need it,” Harry assured him. “He’s supposed to stop by tonight... you’ve got Potions tomorrow, right? He’ll get it to you then. Neville, I’m so—“

“Don’t be sorry,” Neville said firmly. “Just don’t be surprised if I eventually kill her.”

Harry raised his brows, though he ought to not be surprised that his friend had been shaken badly enough by the death of his grandmother that it had brought out a vicious side in him. Merlin knew that the same had happened to Harry. He felt a small pang of wistfulness for the fact that remaining innocent was no longer an option.

“I won’t be,” Ron assured him. “Just don’t be surprised if we help you do it.”

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry knew well enough that the moment Voldemort found out that his mind was connected to Harry's there would be pain and nausea. Therefore, the night that thirteen Death Eaters were to escape from Azkaban prison, Harry sat in the bathroom to avoid projectile vomiting on anything (or anyone) that would not be easy to clean. Ginny sat with him in silence, offering the comfort of her presence. Dumbledore and the others kept vigil in the other room. Snape was the only one not there; as he would be participating in the break-out, however, that was only to be expected.

"What time is it?" Harry asked Ginny.

"Ten past eleven," she answered promptly. "Less than an hour."

"How'd your conversation with Luna go?" Harry asked casually.

"Not this again, Harry," Ginny rolled her eyes. "Luna didn't tell anyone – she swore she wouldn't. Why can't you just trust her?"

"Who else would have told?" Harry asked. "I'm not angry with Luna – whoever she told – if she told, that is – *helped* me. I'm well aware that Kingsley would have stunned me, and I'd be dead by now if it weren't for that Shield Charm."

"How many times have we gone through this?" Ginny asked with exaggerated patience. "It's *March*, Harry. That happened in December, and we've exhausted all venues. And we only know two things for sure... same as we did the night you came back from the Ministry. The person helped you, and he (or she) knows about the time travel."

"But who—"

"I don't know!" Ginny said. "But everyone swore that they wouldn't tell anyone, and I believe them. Luna swore, too."

"Maybe it happened accidentally," Harry said. "Maybe she just let something slip, you know how she is—"

"You think she'd betray us without even realizing it?" Ginny asked incredulously.

"No!" Harry replied. "No. I don't know. She was so young when she found out... it was so long ago..."

Ginny smacked him upside the head. He winced and rubbed at it. "Ouch," he glared. "I don't see why you're so irritated that I think it's a possibility that Luna let something slip. She might've said something to her father... he might have told one of his friends. I dunno, Ginny, she just seems the most likely person to have done it."

"I think it's far likelier that someone guessed," Ginny said. "Sometimes I think Ron's right and it might be Percy."

Harry shrugged. "It's possible, I suppose." He gave her a significant look, showing her how reasonable he could be about other peoples' opinions. "But do you really think that if Percy knew, he wouldn't have approached us about it?"

"It has come to my attention that you are, in fact, time travelers from the future," Ginny said in an amazingly accurate imitation of Percy's pompous manner. "I will, of course, do everything I can to assist you in the downfall of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Yeah," Ginny added in her natural voice. "It doesn't seem like him to stay in the shadows. It doesn't seem like anyone from my family, actually..."

Harry did not say anything. Ginny knew him well enough to guess his thoughts; he did not need to spell them out for her and hurt her worse. It was Harry's opinion that the Weasleys not only did not have the personalities to keep something like this a secret, but they did not have the inclination to do so in this time.

He looked at her, and he saw the fierce, blazing look upon her face, and he felt a rush of gratitude that she was so able to read him that words sometimes seemed completely unnecessary. He didn't have to hide what he thought from her; she usually knew. And she understood that sometimes talking about something just made it far, far worse.

Her gaze dropped to his lips, and he leaned away, shaking his head. "Not now. I don't want to feel him inside my head when I'm kissing you."

"Later, then," Ginny said.

"Without a doubt," Harry told her.

It was two minutes past midnight when Harry's scar throbbed and twisted with a pain so fierce that he thought his head might cleave in two. It only made it worse that Harry had deliberately opened himself up to this, but he gritted his teeth against the pain and dove into Voldemort's thoughts...

Voldemort had never doubted that it would not be long before the dementors joined him. He had always laughed at the stupidity of the Ministry and their strict restrictions on the use of dementors... did they not realize what splendid creatures they were? They were more powerful, more deadly, than the tallest giant or the strongest troll. They did not have to put any effort whatsoever into terrifying enemies. Wizards feared the dementor's Kiss almost as much as they feared Lord Voldemort.

And the Ministry was stupid enough to chain these creatures to a prison. Lord Voldemort would show them the error of their ways tonight. The dementors had allied themselves with him; they had agreed to free his most trusted followers... Lord Voldemort would have his best lieutenants besides Severus Snape and Lucius Malfoy once more. The icy spray of the ocean hit Voldemort's face as he stood waiting for the others to join him. He laughed out loud, wildly, and for a long time.

The Potter boy was even more foolish than the Ministry. He had unwittingly saved the life of Severus Snape and sealed his own eventual doom. Voldemort laughed again and stroked Nagini's head. The foolish child had no idea what he was up against, had no idea that Voldemort was the most powerful wizard in the world. He still did not have the prophecy... but neither did Potter.

And after tonight, Potter would be even more reviled than he already was. His servant Aggie Lafferty would be certain to smear Potter's name even more... the break-out of Azkaban would drive another nail into Potter's coffin. Voldemort watched as small pinpricks of light danced toward him from the direction of the island fortress. Bellatrix Lestrange... Antonin Dolohov... Rodolphus and Rabastan... they all

were coming to meet him, the very best of the followers he had before.

Giddy glee rose up inside him—

Harry pushed at the connection, fighting against the physical agony in his scar. The moment he felt Voldemort's awareness of him... the moment the glee turned to astonishment and rage... Harry pulled back and found himself once more sitting on the cool tile. He threw up his Obfuscomency shields as tightly as he could, and he leaned over the toilet and retched up everything he had eaten that day.

He looked over at Ginny, whose bright eyes were wide and dark in her pale face. "He knows," Harry said grimly. "He'll try to use me to set the trap. We'll just have to figure out the bait..."

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Kingsley and Tonks were extremely instrumental in tracking down Aggie Lafferty without him being any the wiser. Not only did they learn his personal habits, but the baby Death Eater was stupid enough to meet five of his other comrades at a set time each week.

Six birds, one stone, Harry thought grimly. He, Ron, and Ginny stood staring at the squalid little house in a dumpy little town. They were not, however, alone. Sirius had joined them. Dead men, after all, could not bring back word that Harry Potter was not quite as alone as Voldemort thought.

Hermione was not with them, and Harry was not surprised that she had stayed behind to search through ancient tomes Dumbledore had found for her. She was not ready yet – and a part of Harry hoped that she never would be – to see the four of them set out to deliberately kill. It did not sit easily with Harry, either, despite the fact that he knew it would come to this. He had not lied to Crabbe and Goyle.

"All right, mate?" Ron said quietly.

"I will be," Harry said. "He's dangerous. And Snape says that Voldemort gets more and more followers every day. If we don't start – start weeding them out..." his voice trailed away. It was difficult for

him to act as executioner, but the words of Arthur Weasley – the Arthur-who-had-been, before the world had changed completely – gave him determination. Also, Harry cared more about the victims (past and future) of the Death Eaters more than he did raising his wand to kill.

“If it is any consolation, Harry,” Sirius said. “Your father also knew the necessity of killing and—“

Harry glanced at him. “Dumbledore said – last time – that he would not have wanted you and Remus to become murderers just because of Peter Pettigrew.”

Sirius looked thoughtful. “There is a difference, I think, between killing because of vengeance and killing to prevent evil witches and wizards from grasping even more power.”

“I know,” Harry gave him a small smile. “I’m glad you’ve figured that out too.”

Raucous laughter issued from the open windows of the squalid house, and the scent of alcohol mixed with potions wafted past Harry’s nostrils. The somewhat balmy early April night – Harry realized with a small start that the next day was Easter – made the smell even more unpleasant. He scowled with disgust, and not because of the stench.

“Let’s do this,” Harry said grimly. “Go around the back, Sirius.”

Sirius was already creeping around the side of the house. Ron and Ginny secured the windows, and Harry threw up an Anti-Apparation Jinx. The only thing they had to worry about was the Floo... Moody had told them that the hearth was located in the sitting room; if the Death Eaters were quick enough, one or more could escape before Harry could destroy the Floo powder.

Which was why he did not blast open the door. Instead, he opened it quietly, and placed a Silence Shield around him, Ginny, and Ron. Harry grimaced as they passed silently through the hall; the Death Eater journalist lived like a pig; the house had a stench of spoiled food and unwashed body. They navigated around stacks of

newspapers and piles of trash. Moments after they entered, they reached the door of the sitting room.

Aggie Lafferty, short and balding, roared with laughter at something Jack Butler (a Death Eater who specialized in the more delicate poisons) had just said. Simon Mountney leaned casually against the mantle, smirking. Harry thought it was a nice irony that this particular Death Eater, who had stopped the escape of a Muggle-born witch and her family because of his placement in the Department of Magical Transportation, would likely be severely injured when Harry blasted the can of Floo powder apart. Two others – Wren Sterling and Ursa Caldon – spoke in low voices in the corner, smoking pipes.

The last (and Harry could only remember his last name: Tapler) was the first to realize that they were no longer alone. He looked up, gaped, and started to stutter a warning, when Harry raised his wand, whispered a spell, and the can of Floo powder exploded. Simon Mountney screamed and went down; his face was bloody and dotted with shards of metal.

Wren Sterling was slashed from throat to sternum by Ron before the others even drew their wands. As Harry had expected, two of them attempted to escape—

But Sirius disemboweled one, and Ginny struck the other in the back with a Bludgeoning Hex. Both fell to the floor and made no effort to stand, though Harry saw Ursa Caldon twitch a little. Still, her back was bent at an impossible angle... those jerky movements were her last.

"Sectumsempra!" Harry said, and Jack Butler toppled over, blood spraying from his throat.

It had taken less than a minute. Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Sirius pointed their wands at Aggie Lafferty. The wizard had wet himself, and the stench of urine combined with the other unpleasant smells in the house. Harry waved his wand, and Lafferty was bound with black ropes to his chair.

"You know," Harry said. "This entire year, I never even thought that you were a Death Eater. I should have guessed... you were always

willing to give Lucius Malfoy an interview, weren't you? I thought you were just a fool, like almost everyone at the Ministry."

"I – not – I –" Lafferty stammered.

"You're not a Death Eater?" Sirius asked. He slashed the left arm of the wizard's robes, revealing the Dark Mark. "Unfortunately for you, this says otherwise."

"He forced me!" Lafferty said. His eyes were wide and panicked. "Sirius Black – you – you're supposed to be Potter's enemy!"

"Funny thing about that is," Sirius said, "my godson's allies are even better hidden than Voldemort's. You make yourselves easy marks when you torture people and murder them."

"I never—"

"The Burrough family in Bath," Harry said. "You were there two weeks ago when a Muggle dwelling went up in flames. A mother, father, and three children burned to death. Three days ago you participated in the torture of Hollis Keppler of the Department of International Magical Cooperation."

"You have no proof!" Lafferty said.

"We're not the Ministry, scum," Ron curled his lip. "We don't need more evidence than our own eyes. Or Alastor Moody's eye, as the case may be."

"But—"

There was a scuffle and a quiet sound, and Harry whirled around already thinking the spell. But he was too late – there was a loud BANG and a flash of green light, aimed directly at Ginny. He moved, but he was not quick enough—

But Sirius was. He tackled Ginny to the ground, and the Killing Curse struck the wall at the exact height of Ginny's head. Rage and fear thundered through Harry's veins, and he whipped back around and yelled "*Petrificus Totalus*" and watched as Simon Mountney stiffened

up. With slow, deliberate movements, Harry walked over to him and snapped his wand in two. Simon watched, helpless and unable to move.

"I don't think we need to talk anymore," Harry said grimly. He helped Sirius and Ginny to their feet. He trembled. *If Sirius had waited even one more moment...* "Let's go."

"But aren't we—?"

"We're going to burn the house down," Harry said. He did not feel the need to mention that Lafferty and Mountney would still be alive when they did so. He was barely aware of the fact that he left the sitting room, left the house, and walked out to the street.

They lined up on the sidewalk. Harry pointed his wand and whispered, "*Incendio!*" Ginny, Ron, and Sirius echoed him. Harry watched the blaze light up the night sky. He took deep, shuddering breaths. Ginny gripped his arm tightly; he looked down at her and saw that she was pale and trembling just as much as he was.

"Sirius," Harry said fervently. "*Thank you.*"

"Any time, Harry," Sirius said quietly.

Hermione was waiting outside on the porch for them in Godric's Hollow. She let out a wordless cry of relief and threw herself in Ron's arms. Ron hugged her back tightly, and they swayed a little. Harry took the opportunity to crush Ginny to him. He did not trust himself to speak to her just yet. He was afraid that when he opened his mouth, he would try to forbid her from ever placing herself into danger again.

That would not go over well.

"Well," Sirius said. "I think we could all use a good drink. What say you we head to Grimmauld Place? We'll make Kreacher's week by allowing him to wait on us hand and foot."

"That's true," Hermione said. Harry exchanged a weak grin with Ron; Hermione had learned throughout the last months that Kreacher was not in any way, shape, or form a slave. Harry often thought that the

house-elf had a subtle way of manipulating all of them to get his way – which generally meant that they spent more time at Grimmauld Place. Then again, sometimes Kreacher was not so subtle about it. He'd moved their supply of liquor to the basement kitchen of the Black family home, and had charmed it so it changed to water when they tried to bring it over to Godric's Hollow.

Harry eyed Ginny. She had color back in her cheeks, and her jaw was set so tightly that Harry knew that if he asked her if she was sure she was up to it, he would sleep alone for a week. Possibly two. He sighed, and he saw her lips twitch. *Kreacher*, Harry thought, *is not the only one who knows how to manipulate people.*

"Masters! Mistresses!" Kreacher greeted them. "Master Neville, Master Severus, and Mistress Luna are already here—"

"What?" Harry gaped. "Snape, Neville, and Luna are here? Where are they?"

"Kreacher brought them food in the blue room," Kreacher said. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were already thundering up the stairs. Harry hoped that this was not bad news in any way; what if Umbridge had somehow found out something? What if Neville and Luna were on the run? Things would get complicated...

"Hi, Guinevere! Hi, Lancelot! Hi, Arthur!" Luna said brightly. She and Neville sat playing Exploding Snap with Mr. Ollivander. Snape conferred quietly in the corner with Moody. Harry's racing heartbeat slowed. Nothing appeared to be too terribly wrong...

"Er – hi, everyone," Harry said. "Neville – Luna, what are you doing here?"

"Professor Snape brought us," Neville said.

"How did the evening go? Are the Death Eaters dead?" Luna asked.

"Dead as dead can get," Ron confirmed. "All six of them."

“What about Umbridge?” Ginny asked. She directed this question to Snape. “Doesn’t she have ways of knowing when students are out of bed after curfew?”

“Yes,” Snape said curtly. “But those ways require her to be awake. I gave her a very powerful Sleeping Draught—“

“But not the Draught of Living Death,” Neville muttered.

“Perhaps someday, Longbottom,” Snape said.

“That’s great!” Ron said enthusiastically.

Harry wondered why Snape had done this. He eyed the other man; Snape’s face was completely blank, but Harry suspected that Snape had known that Harry and the others would need company. Remus was in Bulgaria, taking steps to protect the secret of the Elder Wand. Tonks and Kingsley were on duty, pretending to search for Harry. And to see his friends outside of the Room of Requirement was a blessing unlooked-for.

“Do not look at me like that, Potter,” Snape said.

Harry raised his brow, attempting to act cool, but he could not stop a small smile. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“I feared that Longbottom would do something rash and kill Umbridge,” Snape lied. Harry’s smile widened. “He has become increasingly angry toward her. As I do not want to fill out the required paperwork, nor do I wish to deal with that complication, I brought him here to calm him down.”

“I’m sure,” Harry said, smirking. “Where’s Albus?”

Snape took a sip of firewhiskey and grimaced. “He had an... unexpected meeting.”

“Harry,” Sirius said testily. A glass of firewhiskey levitated in front of Harry’s eyes. “Are you going to have a drink or what?”

Harry grinned at him, and lifted his glass in a toast. "To a plan well executed... and the fact that you saved my heart tonight."

That required explanation, and the next half hour went by quickly. Sirius told it (and acted out a few scenes) with such dramatic flair that Hermione screamed and Neville squeaked when he told how the Killing Curse had missed Ginny by an inch... Harry felt a wave of relief again as he looked at Ginny. She winked at him and refilled her glass. Ron shared his with Hermione, and Neville appeared to be drinking them at an alarming rate.

The scars on Neville's hand were red and livid.

"I think we ought to go after Umbridge next," Ron said, apparently thinking along the same lines as Harry.

Neville laughed. "Please do."

They spent the next hour plotting different ways to bring down Umbridge. As they also consumed more firewhiskey than they ought to, each grew more unlikely than the last. Harry's head was spinning slightly, Ginny was a warm weight in his lap, and he roared with laughter.

"No, no, no!" Neville shouted. His face was flushed with drink, and he downed two inches of firewhiskey in one gulp. "That would *never* work, Hermione. I think we should make her write with a great big blood quill that cuts right through her heart..."

"Even blood quills are fallible, Longbottom," Snape said coldly. "Have you not learned anything at all in the five years of your magical education? Umbridge has no heart. Even if the quill were the size of Hagrid, it would still be impossible."

"We could just use a big knife," Sirius pointed out. "And cut out her lungs."

"You are as foolish as always, Black," Snape said. "If she is one of the undead – as I highly suspect she is – then she does not have to breathe. We will have to decapitate her."

“OH!” Ron shouted. Hermione jumped. “I’ve got it! I’ve got it!”

“What is it, Lancelot?” Luna asked.

But Ron was laughing too hard to make any sense.
“Wegibberlurvansennervoldemort!”

“What?” Harry said blankly.

“English, Ron,” Hermione said patiently.

“Let’s give her a love potion and send her to Voldemort!” Ron said ecstatically. “Nothing could possibly go wrong with *that* plan. Either Voldemort would fuck her – and I doubt she’d survive that – or he’d kill her. Or Bellatrix would do it for him!”

“RON!” Ginny shouted, while Harry roared with laughter. Neville actually sank down onto the floor he was laughing so hard. Sirius pounded the arm of his chair with his fist, and Harry thought he even might have heard a chuckle from Snape. “THAT – IS – DISGUSTING!”

“It fits,” Ron insisted. “It’s perfect!”

“You know,” Harry was suddenly struck by a thought that filled him with horror. “I reckon I’m glad Voldemort is a cold son of a bitch... what if I felt him having sex with some witch?”

Ron sprayed out his firewhiskey. “No wonder why Voldemort’s so cranky! He’s a virgin!”

Harry’s belly actually hurt from laughing so hard. The room rang with it. It was so loud, in fact, that it took him a while to realize that they had company.

He heard a gasp; it sounded feminine, so he turned his head to greet Tonks and tell her to grab a glass—

And his heart nearly failed. Mrs. Weasley stood in the doorway with her hands over her mouth and her eyes wide and darting from Ron, to Ginny, and then to Harry. Mr. Weasley stood behind her,

speechless and confused. Bill and Charlie were staring at each other; Fleur Delcour's mouth was open in a perfect O shape. Percy's mouth was slightly parted... he did not look as surprised as the rest of his family. Even the twins were there, both looking as though they'd been hit in the head with a very large stick.

Albus Dumbledore stood behind them. He met Harry's eyes steadily. "They've chosen, Harry," he said simply.

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Author's Note:

evil laughter

Chapter 29 – Interlude: Molly Weasley

MOLLY WEASLEY

MOLLY WEASLEY

“We have to go to Dumbledore with this,” Bill said.

Molly stared around at her family. Bill’s face was set and white; his girlfriend Fleur gripped his hand tightly. Charlie was pretending to darn a balaclava, but Molly knew that her son was just as frightened as she was. Her twins were serious for once; there was no laughter at all on their faces, only the sort of fear that made them look older than their eighteen years. Only Percy seemed almost relaxed.

“Arthur?” she said quietly.

“Bill’s right,” he said. “Dumbledore really is the only person we can trust, you know. Even if he doesn’t believe us, he’ll listen.”

“We’ll send him an owl,” Bill said. “Immediately. We can’t just sit on this any longer.”

Charlie rose quickly. “We’ll use Hermes,” he said. “He’ll get there faster than Errol.”

“Don’t say anything important,” Fred said. “That Umbridge woman is watching the owls, we know she is.”

“We’ll just ask him about Ron and Ginny,” Charlie said. “Nothing at all strange about that. Merlin knows we’ve been pretty loud about wanting to find them.”

He scrawled out a note, and then read it aloud to the entire family. Within minutes, Hermes was winging his way to Hogwarts, to Albus Dumbledore. *No*, Molly thought, seeing that her youngest son and daughter were still gone. *Not the entire family*. Not for the first time, she wondered if they were dead. She glanced at the clock on the wall; Ron’s and Ginny’s hands sat firmly at Mortal Peril, where they had been since the morning after that horrible row, and she had found their beds empty and cold...

The trial of the century was over, and Molly could only feel relief that her family had not been dragged into it even more than it already had been. It had been the right decision. Insisting that Ron and Ginny stay away from Harry Potter had protected Molly's family in ways that she had half-expected. Still... she felt terrible for poor Sirius Black who had already lost so much. The anguish in his voice had followed her all the way home.

Four of her sons and her daughter waited in the sitting room, obviously waiting to hear the verdict. "What happened, Mum?" Percy asked quietly..

"He's been given a life sentence to Azkaban," Arthur said tiredly. He looked just as relieved as Molly felt. Things could have been so much worse... it could have been Ron and Ginny under the Imperius Curse.

Percy shook his head, looking rather dazed. "I just can't believe it... I always thought Harry was a decent sort."

Molly glanced at her daughter. Ginny had her head in her hands, and she was squeezing hanks of her long hair in her hands. Molly did not think that a boy who would intimately touch a twelve year old was a decent sort. It made her furious just to think about it. "Well," she said, making an effort to keep her voice steady. "I'm sure they'll find him soon. And then it'll be over."

Ron muttered something under his breath.

"What was that, dear?" she smiled, reaching over to pat his shoulder. Poor Ron... it must be terribly difficult for him to have his former best friend turn out to be dark.

"Nothing," Ron said.

Molly set about preparing dinner for her family, while Arthur went into greater detail about what had happened at the trial. She was extremely grateful that the children were not allowed inside the court. Perhaps Ron and Ginny would have been called to testify... that would have hurt them so badly. Though it was possible they might have spoken for Harry, as Augusta and Xeno had. I just don't know what those two were thinking, Molly thought grimly.

“Mum?” Fred said. “Is dinner ready?”

“Just a moment, dear,” Molly said. She used her wand to send the knives chopping the carrots; and, with a flourish, sent a creamy sauce over the noodles. Arthur levitated the plates and silverware over to the table and they all sat down. She watched Ron and Ginny closely; they only picked at their food and kept glancing at each other out the corner of their eyes.

She was about to say something, when Arthur did it for her. “I can imagine how you must be feeling—”

“No, you can’t,” Ginny said sharply.

“We can,” Molly assured her. They could speak later about how Ginny was not to use that tone when addressing her parents no matter how hard she tried. “I had a cousin who joined the Death Eaters. We were of an age, and I thought I knew him quite well. And – and he was there that night when your uncles died. Ginny, my dearest, we know what betrayal feels like—”

“YOU THINK I DON’T?” Ginny shouted. Her face was bright red. “Maybe I think that the entire Wizarding world is betraying Harry – and so are you.”

“Ginny!” Arthur said. “How can you possibly say that? He used Unforgivable Curses. He’s been evading the Ministry—”

Ginny’s nostrils flared and her lips were white. Molly stared, almost fascinated by the rage on her daughter’s face. “They never confirmed that he used more than one Unforgivable,” Ginny said.

“Still,” Molly said. “The use of just one requires a life sentence to Azkaban. You are far too young to understand this, which is why I am making allowance for your tone, young lady, but the Imperius Curse is a horrible thing. It is undetectable... and even when good people are put under it, they can be forced to do horrible things.”

“That doesn’t sound too hard to understand,” Ron put in. Molly could not quite place his tone, but she did not like it. She knew that Ron and Ginny must be feeling horribly betrayed, but it was not advisable

to let them continue. They would need to face this sooner or later... and something as truly heart-wrenching as this would only get worse the longer they ignored it.

"Don't speak to your mother that way," Arthur said.

"Percy," Molly said. "Fred – George. I want you to go to your rooms. Now."

Molly stared at her two youngest while the others filed silently out of the kitchen. She did not fully understand why both of them were glaring at opposite walls with such defiance. Didn't they realize that she was only trying to help? She was trying to protect them?

"The Imperius Curse—"

"We know what it does," Ginny said. "But no one even bothered asking why Harry did it, did they? What if he had a good reason?"

"There is no good reason for it," Arthur said firmly. "None at all."

Ron snorted.

Molly felt it like a physical blow. Her son just laughed at them. Ron's long, lanky body was stretched out in his chair. He looked entirely relaxed. This seemed so wrong – she could not believe that her son was taking this so lightly – that she felt as though she were looking at a complete stranger. She traded glances with Arthur, and she saw that her husband feared the same thing.

"I am very disappointed in you, young man," Arthur said quietly. Ron jerked as though he had been struck. "Very. I don't know where we went wrong when we raised you, but the fact that you consider the use of an Unforgivable to be funny is against everything your mother and I stand for."

"I don't think it's funny," Ron said. "I just think that it's pretty hypocritical of you to say that, Dad. The Ministry used it loads of times in the last war."

"That was different," Arthur said.

Ron and Ginny exchanged glances. Both of them appeared to be clenching their fists. "Harry Potter is not a Ministry employee," Molly said. "He's obviously a very confused and disturbed young man—"

"Don't say another word," Ginny said through gritted teeth.

"GINEVRA WEASLEY!" Arthur yelled. Even Molly jumped. She could not remember the last time Arthur had raised his voice to one of the children. "DO NOT MAKE ME SILENCE YOU!"

"You might as well," Ginny said, unafraid. "You're obviously not listening to anything I'm saying. I trust that Harry had a good reason—"

"HARRY POTTER IS NOT TO BE TRUSTED!" Arthur bellowed. "I'VE KNOWN IT FOR AGES – HE'S ONLY PROVEN IT TIME AND AGAIN!"

Ron stood up so suddenly that his chair went flying backward. "YOU KNOW WHAT I THINK HE'S PROVEN TIME AND AGAIN, DAD? THE FACT THAT HE'D – DO – ANYTHING – TO – SAVE – PEOPLE! WHAT IF I TOLD YOU HE—"

"Ron," Ginny said so quietly that Molly could barely hear her. "Don't."

"That's enough," Molly said. "Go to your rooms. Both of you. You're both going to have a good, long think about whom and what you're defending."

"Do not make the mistake of choosing to side with Harry," Arthur added. "And you stay in your rooms until your mother and I come to get you."

Without another word, Ron and Ginny left the kitchen. Molly fairly gasped for breath. What had happened to her little girl who loved sunshine and flying on a broom? And the son who used to be so insecure about being the youngest son... where had her babies gone?

She asked herself that same question when she entered Ginny's room the next morning. Arthur was the one who found the note that read: "We've chosen Harry. You should too."

She put her face in her hands. Arthur's hand came up to stroke her back. She allowed herself to cry, but only for a few moments.

"I expect we'll be waiting a while," she said. "I'll make us dinner... he might not even reply tonight."

She found solace in cooking, she always had. There was nothing that Molly Weasley loved more than ensuring that her family was fed and well cared for. *I hope they're eating all right, wherever they are*, she thought. She ignored the fact that a few tears spilled into the soup she was making.

Her family was silent throughout the meal. Molly found herself watching anxiously out the window for another owl, even though she knew that there was no way that even Hermes could reach Hogwarts... it would take a few hours, at least.

Night stretched on. Molly felt sick to her stomach with fear and worry; the meal she had eaten sat in her stomach like a rock. The Burrow was unnaturally quiet.

"I think we should try to go to bed," she finally said at midnight. "It'll have to wait until—"

But she was interrupted by a bright burst of flame, and Dumbledore's phoenix appeared in the center of the room. He dropped a note in the middle of the floor; Arthur started to reach for it when there was another blast of heat, and the phoenix disappeared again.

"What does it say, Arthur?" she whispered.

"We're to Floo to his office," he said simply. "Right now."

They were galvanized into motion. Molly lifted her wand, and Summoned traveling cloaks enough for all of them. They gathered around the hearth, still fastening them underneath their chins. Molly knew that they must look a fright. All of them were rumpled and

sleep-deprived. But she couldn't stretch herself to care about that for once. Dumbledore would understand.

"I'll go first," Arthur said. He stepped into the flames, shouted "Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office!" and whirled away. Molly waited several breaths before she followed.

Arthur dusted himself off, and she did the same. Bill came next, and almost knocked her over.

"Sorry, Mum," he murmured. Fleur followed next. Within minutes, Percy, Charlie, Fred, and George arrived. It was only then that Molly looked around and found Dumbledore seated behind his desk, staring at them.

"Good evening," he said pleasantly, as if he often entertained disheveled guests at this hour of the night.

They greeted him.

Molly gazed around the room, trying to prolong the moment. The portraits were all awake, and appeared to be avidly interested in what was happening. She wished there weren't so many of them.

"None of you move," Dumbledore said. Molly jolted before she realized that it was to the portraits that Dumbledore spoke. One of them snorted and rolled his eyes. Apparently he had little respect for the current headmaster. "You wished to speak to me about your son and daughter?"

Molly licked her lips. "Well... in a manner of speaking."

"We didn't know how else to get you to grant us an audience," Arthur said.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Strange things have been happening," Bill said. "And we don't have anyone else to turn to, actually."

“We know – my brothers told me,” Molly began, and felt a little stab of anguish at the thought of Gideon and Fabian. What if Ron and Ginny had already met the – but she didn’t let herself finish the thought. “That you were once the head of the Order of the Phoenix.”

“That is correct,” Dumbledore said. “I take it you are here to ask me to begin it once again in opposition to Harry Potter?”

Molly bit her lip. None of the other members of her family said anything.

He surveyed them calmly. “It must be difficult for you, as your son and daughter are in league with him.”

Several of the portraits on the walls coughed. One opened his mouth to speak, but Dumbledore shot it a quelling look. Molly’s heart was galloping in her chest. What if he dismissed their concerns simply because they were family?

“No,” she said. “I don’t want – I don’t want you to...” but she couldn’t continue.

Dumbledore looked genuinely shocked for a moment before he leaned back in his chair. Something shifted in the room, though Molly had no idea what. The portraits were staring at her even more than ever. She felt herself flush under the scrutiny.

She straightened herself up. “I suppose we’d better begin at the beginning. It all started, really, when we... we had a row with Ron and Ginny. They’ve always been friendly with Harry Potter, since the moment we met them. We had concerns, as you know, but they’re both very stubborn. Then they disappeared, leaving a note that they’d gone to wherever Harry Potter went after he... left.”

“I am the Chief Warlock on the Wizengamot,” he said gently. “I heard your testimony. You said that you think he’d bewitched them; you suspected that he used the Imperius Curse upon them as he did to Cedric Diggory.”

“And we did,” Molly said. “We really did. You have to admit that he’s done some very suspicious things. Everyone knows that he used that curse.”

“Yes,” Dumbledore said. “There is no denying that he did so. But you no longer believe that he used it upon your children? You think now that they are with him willingly?” There was a sudden chill in the air, and Molly wrapped her cloak around herself more tightly.

“Yes,” Bill said. “We do.”

Dumbledore sighed and rose from his chair. Molly knew that they were about to be dismissed. “Thank you for this information, I know it must be difficult for you—“

“Wait!” Arthur said. He sounded a bit desperate. “That isn’t really why we’re here – I mean, it is. But we have more to tell you.”

“The entire country went mad while I was in Romania,” Charlie said. “I came back the day before Augusta Longbottom and Xeno Lovegood were murdered, and the Granger couple was discovered missing.”

“And everyone blamed Harry Potter,” Arthur put in. “We were pulled off all our regular jobs at the Ministry, and we were all given the task of finding him and putting him on trial.”

“Like my son said,” Molly said, “it was complete madness. And for a while we were swept away in it. I’ll be the first to admit that. But once things settled a little, we started to actually think about it.” The full weight of Dumbledore’s stare was on her now.

“And?” he said.

“We... we found it a little funny that we weren’t killed too,” Arthur said. “It isn’t a secret that Harry Potter’s closest friends were related to Augusta and Xeno. That’s what put the suspicion on him, as I’m sure you know. Many suspected that he killed them to tighten the control he had over them.”

“I am aware of this,” Dumbledore said. “Explain to me why you find it odd that you weren’t killed.”

“Because he didn’t have a reason to hurt Augusta and Xeno,” Molly explained. “They didn’t... by all accounts, they liked him. And we didn’t – and he never tried to bewitch us into... into liking him. He could have taken away our wills.”

“And you feel that because you have been quite vocal about your distrust for him, that if anyone were to be targeted it would be you?” Dumbledore asked. He was so calm, so unflappable, that Molly felt a momentary urge to shake him. “That if Potter was really the monster that the Ministry believes him to be, you and your entire family would be dead?”

“Yes,” Arthur said.

“And that isn’t the only odd thing,” Bill said. “I had to go out of the country on Gringott’s business right after they were killed. When I came home and visited the Burrow, I noticed that there were very powerful wards around it. I didn’t think anything of it until Dad asked me if I would set some up for him.”

“I didn’t set up any of the wards,” Arthur said. “And I initially thought that the Ministry had... but when I talked to Rufus Scrimgeour about it, he said that it wasn’t anything they’d done.”

“What kind of wards were these?” Dumbledore asked.

“Subtle ones,” Bill answered promptly. “We never would have noticed if I hadn’t caught sight of one. It’s taken months of research for me to even be able to name them. But Dumbledore... they’re blood wards, which means that it had to have been keyed by a member of the Weasley family, and it wasn’t any of us. So it had to be either Ron or Ginny.”

“Do you think they may have done this in order to protect you from Harry Potter?”

Molly felt uncertain all of a sudden. What if he didn’t believe them? He seemed determined to point his finger at Harry Potter at every turn.

“No,” Arthur said.

“Dad,” Charlie said. “We have to tell him everything, lay it all out for him.”

“You have my full attention,” Dumbledore nodded. “Whatever it is you have to say, I am listening.”

“I’m sure you have heard of my attack?” Arthur asked. “The Ministry had us on a rotating system, guarding the door to the Department of Mysteries. They didn’t tell us why—“

“I am the one who suggested this,” Dumbledore said.

“Well,” Arthur said. “I think – we think – that we were guarding the prophecy. It is a well-known fact that that Department studies prophecies and the like. So... did you think that Harry Potter would attempt to retrieve it?”

“I thought it... a possibility,” Dumbledore said.

“I was guarding the door one night, and the snake attacked out of nowhere,” Arthur said. “I had fallen asleep... I woke up to find myself being bitten again and again. I thought I was going to die. But... someone saved me. My glasses had fallen, and I can’t see anything without them. But someone with black hair healed me enough so that I did not die. I don’t remember anything after that, but...”

“Someone with black hair?” Dumbledore asked. “Surely you aren’t suggesting that it was Harry Potter who saved you?”

Molly felt a rush of disorientation. She remembered sitting in here, accusing Harry Potter of opening the Chamber of Secrets and possibly murdering her daughter and son. How odd that she was now attempting to defend him from the man who had been so sure that he could not do such a thing.

“I think it was,” Arthur said. “I can’t be certain, of course. We don’t have any solid proof, it’s all rather circumstantial.”

“Not all of it,” Fred spoke up unexpectedly. “Professor, we know Neville Longbottom. We also know his history, and what happened to his parents. He wouldn’t side with the wizard who helped the

Lestranges go free any more than I'd eat flobberworms. But I think it's insane."

"Neville would never help the Death Eater that tortured his parents into insanity go free," George said firmly. "That's what really put us off to the way the world's gone mad."

Dumbledore did not say anything for so long that Molly began to grow even more afraid. If he stopped listening now... "It is a common belief that Mr. Longbottom and Miss Lovegood severed ties with Potter after the murder of their parents."

"Tell him about that Map," Molly ordered her twins.

"Right," Fred said, looking uncomfortable. "Well... we had this Map, you see, of Hogwarts. It showed where everyone was."

"And where all the secret passageways were," George put in. "It went missing back in our fifth year. We thought Potter'd taken it, actually, because it was right after he messed around with Ginny—"

"—and he knew we'd be watching him," Fred said.

"We didn't see it until the first day of term last year," George said. "But then it was lying under Fred's pillow."

"How extraordinary," Dumbledore murmured.

"We think Neville put it there," Fred informed him. "He was seen coming out of the dorm by one of our year mates. We asked him about it, but he said he had no idea what we were talking about."

"We think he was lying," George said. "And Neville's been up to something all year, even before he disappeared. He used to be really shy—"

"—but he started making loads of friends in the other houses," Fred said. "We watched him on the Map," he admitted. "We thought he was acting fishy."

"And did you see him do anything fishy?" Dumbledore asked.

“That’s the thing!” George said. “He and a bunch of other students would disappear off the Map for hours at a time. We couldn’t rumble how they were leaving.”

“That is very odd,” Dumbledore said. “Do you believe he was up to anything nefarious?”

“No,” Fred shook his head firmly. “Not at all. He and Luna always stand up to Umbridge.”

“No offense,” George said. “But she’s horrible.”

“And she was using a Blood Quill on Neville,” Fred said. “We heard him talking about it with Dean Thomas. He said that she was trying to get Potter’s whereabouts from him. And then Dean asked if he’d told her—“

“—and Neville said that no matter how many times she made him cut his own hand, he wouldn’t tell her where he was or what he was up to. Dean said that he’d better not,” George finished.

“You’ve come to me with a school-wide conspiracy to protect Harry Potter?” Dumbledore raised his eyebrows.

“NO!” Molly heard herself shout. “That isn’t why we’ve come. We think that... we think that...” but she was still so afraid, she couldn’t bring herself to say it.

“Allow me to attempt to piece together what you are saying,” Dumbledore said. “You believe that Harry Potter might be protecting you. You no longer believe that he is as criminal as you originally thought. You believe that your son and daughter are with him by choice. You do not believe that he was the one to murder Augusta Longbottom and Xeno Lovegood; you also do not believe that he was responsible for the mass breakout of Azkaban. You, Arthur, believe that he saved your life.”

“Yes,” Molly said in a small voice. “That’s what we’re saying.”

One of the portraits made a rude noise. Molly thought it might have been the same one who had snorted earlier, but she could not be sure.

“Enough, Phineas,” Dumbledore said. “Do you have any theories as to who killed Augusta Longbottom and Xeno Lovegood?”

Molly closed her eyes. “We think,” she whispered, “we think it was You-Know-Who. We think He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back.”

“It’s the only explanation that makes sense,” Arthur said quickly.

“We know it’s a wild theory,” Bill said, “but no one knows what really happened that night when You-Know-Who killed the Potters and tried to kill Harry. I believe that you yourself have always said that he’d come back someday?”

“I did,” Dumbledore said. “I have to confess to some surprise that you have come to this conclusion. It has been apparent to me for quite some time that you distrust Harry Potter.”

“I didn’t,” Percy spoke for the first time since they had arrived. “I admit that the fact that he used an Unforgivable Curse threw me for a while. But Harry threw himself in front of a curse for me – the Cruciatus Curse, in fact, as I’m sure you remember.”

“I remember,” Dumbledore said. “I also remember that you two, Molly, Arthur, have been as frightened as the terrible power he is professed to have as the rest of the Wizarding world.”

And Molly had to admit that she still was. The idea of it frightened her a great deal. But she was more frightened of losing her children to You-Know-Who, just as she had lost her brothers.

“We’re more frightened of You-Know-Who,” Arthur said, echoing her thoughts.

Dumbledore stared at Molly, and then her husband, and then her sons, and then Fleur so intensely that Molly felt like her soul had been laid bare. She was sure that the others felt the same.

“What,” Dumbledore began, “do you intend to do?”

“We want to help them, of course!” Charlie said loudly. “If it’s You-Know-Who, then he’s after Harry Potter. And if he’s after him, then my brother and sister are in danger.”

“We have a clock,” Molly said through numb lips, “that shows us where everyone in the family is at. It has ‘Work’ and ‘School’ and ‘Home’ and ‘Traveling’ on it... but Ron’s and Ginny’s hands aren’t pointed at any of those. They’re pointed at ‘Mortal Peril’ and...”

“And we intend to help them,” Arthur said firmly when Molly’s voice trailed away.

“Just to be clear,” Dumbledore said. Molly had the feeling that he was pushing them toward something, though she did not know what. How could they state it any clearer than that? “You are choosing to align yourself with Harry Potter? You trust that he is, indeed, on the right side?”

“Yes,” Molly managed with a shaky voice. A year ago, she would have said that she would never stand before Albus Dumbledore and claim that she trusted Harry Potter. Not even a few months ago. But she could not ignore the facts, and she hoped that Dumbledore did not either.

“All of you?”

“Yes,” said Arthur.

“Yes,” chorused all of her sons and Fleur. Molly did not know how it had happened that Fleur Delacour had gained a place with her family. But it seemed only right to have her here. She took her eyes off Fleur, and brought them back to Dumbledore. He seemed quite pleased about something, not at all appropriate in the situation.

He stood up rather abruptly, wrote something hastily on a scrap of parchment, gave it to the phoenix, and murmured something in too low a voice for Molly to hear. Her heart started pounding rather abruptly. Was he telling the Ministry? Were they about to be handed over to them?

He grabbed what looked like a metal bowl with strange runes around the lip out of a cupboard. Molly could only watch, feeling more confused by the moment, as he bustled around.

“Professor, what—“ George began.

“Not now, Mr. Weasley,” Dumbledore said. “Now, listen to me. We are going to Number 12, Grimmauld Place. Repeat that after me. And then use the Floo to get there.”

“Number 12, Grimmauld Place,” Molly and her family repeated.

“After you,” he said. Molly was the last of her family to leave the same way they had come. She caught a last glimpse of Dumbledore – he was beaming at the portraits... and the portraits had started to cheer. Before she could think about this oddity, she felt herself whisked away through the flames.

She found herself in a large kitchen. The other members of her family stared around at it; they looked just as bewildered as she felt.

“What the hell?” Bill said blankly. Molly could not even bring herself to admonish him for cursing.

Several things happened at once: Dumbledore stepped out of the Floo... and Molly heard her daughter yell “RON!” at the top of her voice. She was not in the dark kitchen, and she sounded quite far away. But that was Ginny’s voice... her little girl.

“THAT – IS – DISGUSTING!” Ginny yelled again.

For a moment, Molly simply could not move. The rest of her family was equally frozen. She whirled on Dumbledore. “You knew? You knew! And you didn’t – I can’t believe – you didn’t tell us!”

“Excuse me for a moment,” Dumbledore ignored her. He was looking concerned and distracted while he stared at the ceiling. “I believe they might need a warning.”

“No,” Molly said. “I’m going up right now – Dumbledore, I simply can’t believe—“

But she interrupted herself by fleeing the kitchen, her family on her heels. She followed the sound of voices and loud laughter – her babies sounded so *happy*. A low voice – Molly was certain that it was Harry's – said something that Molly just didn't understand. She could not possibly have heard what she thought she heard.

And then she heard Ron say quite clearly, "No wonder why Voldemort's so cranky! He's a virgin!"

Molly stopped dead in her tracks. She had *never* heard You-Know-Who spoken of so irreverently. She glanced around, heart racing, feeling quite as though the dark wizard would jump out at them and attack her son. But the only thing that happened was a burst of raucous, immoderate laughter issuing from behind the open door to the room only a few feet away.

"Molly," Dumbledore said.

She ignored him, and followed the sound of her children's voices. She hadn't seen them for so long...

She ought to have known that Ron, Ginny, and Harry were not the only ones at Grimmauld Place. If Dumbledore had known... who else knew? She had her answer when she stepped into the room. Sirius Black had her arm around Ron's shoulder and was ruffling his hair with the other hand. Severus Snape sat in the corner, his lips twitching. Hermione Granger (who had *not* been smuggled out of the country for her own safety, apparently) sat on the floor, leaning up against her son's legs. Neville Longbottom was laughing so hard that he appeared to be unable to breathe. Luna Lovegood, however, stared straight at Molly, an inscrutable expression on her face.

And Ginny sat on Harry's lap, and she was gazing down at him with such a look of tenderness and affection that Molly's heart was pierced with the truth that her daughter was in love with Harry Potter. And it was as deep and as real as what Molly felt for Arthur. She gasped.

Harry turned to look at her, and the laughing look on his face was swiftly replaced by one of utter shock. He looked from her to Arthur and the rest of the family. His mouth was slightly open. Ginny, sensing the tension, turned as well. Molly could only stare at her. She

looked so different. She seemed so much older, as if it had been five years since Molly had seen her instead of nine months.

“They’ve chosen, Harry,” Dumbledore said quietly. He had followed them from the kitchen without Molly even noticing it.

Molly saw a flash of pure, fierce joy in Harry’s green eyes. It made her stagger, and Arthur gripped her elbow to steady her. But she watched that emotion fade away into something colder. His mouth hardened, and the room seemed to grow colder.

“WHAT THE BLOODY HELL?” Ron shouted. He had risen halfway to his feet, knocking Hermione over in the process. “Sorry, Hermione. What the bloody hell are you lot doing here?”

Molly had spent a great deal of time and energy in the last few months preparing for this meeting. She had been very afraid that she would see that stranger she had glimpsed in her son off and on throughout the last five years. But Ron – he was Ron. He looked confused and angry and hurt, and as much as Molly regretted the fact she had obviously hurt him quite a lot during that row, but she was glad that his eyes were angry and not cold...

“What do you mean, they’ve chosen?” Ginny said. Her voice was icy and calm. Molly turned her eyes to her daughter. Ginny steadfastly refused to return her look. Her jaw was clenched tight.

“They’ve chosen,” Dumbledore repeated. “They came to my office tonight and told me they thought that Voldemort had returned – and they wished to help.”

“It’s a bit late, don’t you think?” Harry asked. “Bully for them, though. I don’t think I’ve ever been more surprised in my life. I thought they’d come face to face with Voldemort and still *accuse their own children of being evil!*”

He looked around, as if expecting someone to stop him. But Ron and Ginny said nothing. Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom, and Sirius Black were stony-faced and silent. Snape had an inscrutable look on his face. And Luna Lovegood merely watched as if she found the proceedings mildly interesting. Molly opened and closed her

mouth, but she could not think of anything to say. Words had deserted her.

“Now, listen,” Bill said angrily. “You couldn’t have expected us to know, or to trust—“

“THAT – IS – MY – POINT!” Harry shouted. His cheeks were flushed from more than the firewhiskey he had consumed, and his black hair stood on end. “LOOK AROUND! YOU SEE THESE PEOPLE? THEY DIDN’T LET ANY FUCKING ARTICLES TURN THEM AWAY BEFORE THEY EVEN MET ME! AND YOU”—he pointed at Molly and Arthur; it felt like a malediction—“OUGHT TO HAVE TRUSTED YOUR CHILDREN!”

“We – they’d,” Molly began helplessly. The young man who stood before her was livid... but underneath the rage was a deep well of pain that she could not even begin to understand. “They’ve *changed*.”

“Not to mention what you did to our sister,” Charlie put in. He had the strongest temper of all Molly’s sons, and she had expected him to step in before this, though she fervently wished that he would remain silent. “Don’t think that just because I know Voldemort’s back I’ve forgotten that.”

Harry sneered. “I’m surprised you’ve forgotten my terrible – fucking – power. What? Not worried that I’m going to... what was it? Lead the family down a dark and dangerous path? Not so afraid that I’m going to bewitch you?”

“No, we’re—“

“Changing your tune a bit?”

“Try to see it from our perspective,” Arthur said.

“I have tried!” Harry roared. “I’ve tried for almost three years! But the moment you broke your daughter’s heart – do you have any idea how many times she’s cried herself to sleep because of you? – I stopped understanding.”

“Harry,” Sirius murmured.

Molly glanced at Arthur. Her husband looked just as bewildered as she felt. But she had a growing sense of dread that they had made a more dreadful mistake than they had thought. Why was he lashing out at them? And why had her son and daughter moved to stand behind him? She had the feeling that she had walked into something far more complicated than she had ever dreamed.

There was a long moment when they all simply stared at one another. Molly felt like she was standing on the edge of a chasm. She and Arthur, Bill and Fleur, Charlie and Percy, and the twins stood on one side. And the others watched them, with accusation in their eyes, from the other.

“What the hell is going on?” Charlie asked. “I think our concerns were legitimate.”

“You understand nothing,” Ginny said. She and Ron looked to Harry.

“You want to understand?” he said in a low voice. “Albus. The Pensieve.”

The strange bowl was produced and placed upon the table next to two empty bottles of firewhiskey. The silence had changed; there was an air of expectation, even one of relief. Molly felt like she was floundering and lost.

Harry raised his wand to his temple. He pulled out a long, silvery strand of what looked like lightning made nearly solid. He flung it into the bowl with a sharp gesture; it made a rather loud slapping sound. He repeated this action. “You”—*slap*—“will”—*slap*—“understand”—*slap, slap*—“everything.”

“Harry,” Dumbledore murmured. “Don’t do anything you’ll regret.”

Harry stared at Molly and the rest of the family. Quite deliberately, he added several more silvery strands to the bowl. “I can’t imagine why I would regret it.”

“Is that a Pensieve?” Bill asked. “What—“

“Just go,” Harry ordered.

Molly took a deep breath and stepped forward. She poked her head in and her body followed. There was a rushing sensation in her belly, and she found herself on a scene of devastation. Before she could gasp or scream, her family joined her.

Bill shouted. "Merlin! When did *this* happen?"

"What are we seeing?" Arthur asked.

"Harry's memories," Bill said.

"That silvery stuff was his memories?" Fred asked. He was very pale.

Molly forced herself to look around. They were at Hogwarts – but that was impossible! It was demolished... destroyed. Bodies were strewn all over the grounds and the steps like broken rag dolls. Blood made the stones a deep, sick red instead of grey. Molly clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Mum," George said in a strangled voice. "Mum. Mum, that's me!"

Molly was about to deny it, but there was no mistaking his pale face and shock of red hair. She flicked her eyes between the dead George and the living... the one that lay at her feet was older... but how—

The scene whirled around her, and they were again at Hogwarts. This time, they were not surrounded by the dead, but by the living... and the dead. Hundreds of bodies lined a flat, marble stone. Molly felt herself inexorably pulled toward it... she wanted to see if she knew anyone else.

She heard a low, keening wail. There before her was everyone who stood with her and watched this right now. Including Molly herself... she saw them... Arthur, Percy, Fred (barely recognizable), George, Bill, Charlie, even Fleur... And she noticed another wail, and saw where her daughter knelt before the stone.

Harry stood knelt beside her. His arms were wrapped around her, and Molly could see quite clearly that his face was screwed up in a grimace of pain that was as mournful as the grieving sounds Ginny made. Molly stood there for a long time, just staring, hardly able to

breathe. A loud voice caught her attention. "Voldemort is dead." Molly recognized Filius Flitwick's voice. "But the entire flower of a generation has been lost. The price of freedom from tyranny and darkness lies on the marble stone behind me. I would ask you not to forget, but I do not need to... this tragedy will be emblazoned on the minds and hearts of the few of us who survived."

The scene shifted again, and Molly found herself standing in the office of the headmaster. "The price was too high," Harry said. And the conversation that followed changed Molly's world forever. The Weasley family drew in a deep breath as one, as a piece of the puzzle clicked into place.

"No," Molly murmured. Her thoughts were disjointed, and she barely understood what was happening. But the fact that her son, daughter, and Harry Potter had *traveled back in time* penetrated. She found her hand in Arthur's grasp – he was squeezing so tightly it hurt...

And then they were in the basement kitchen of this house – Grimmauld Place. She sat alone with Harry Potter... and Molly realized that she had loved him like a son. She saw the look in her own eyes. The faith, the trust, the conviction that he would defeat You-Know-Who. "I've never doubted," Molly heard herself say. "I knew it from the moment you saved Ginny from the Chamber of Secrets, and maybe even before that."

Tears streamed down her face as she realized the enormity of the mistake she had made and the hurt she had inflicted. It broke her heart...

It broke Arthur's when they were shown a similar scene. Harry had sought out Arthur in a shed... and Arthur had not turned him away. In fact, it looked as though both men were entirely comfortable. Almost like father and son...

It happened for each of them. Each scene battered Molly's heart a little more, until she could not bear to keep her eyes open, but could not seem to look away. Harry giving the twins the money to start the joke shop... Harry laughing immoderately with the twins... Harry proudly wearing his Weasley sweater, standing and carrying on a cordial conversation with Bill...

It wasn't exactly the scenes that he showed them. They weren't earth-shattering... at least not on a physical way. There was no loud declaration of how much they thought of Harry as part of the family. But Molly saw it in the way they looked at him and treated him, and the horrible sense that they had missed out on something essential welled up inside her.

Flickers of memory drifted past – Ginny weeping, Ron stony-faced...

Another long one...

The three of them – it was far in the future, they looked terribly old – stood before a portrait of Dumbledore. "You really think we should wait to tell them?" Harry asked. "Really?"

"Yes," Dumbledore said. "Allow them to make the choice to help you. You are not a god, Harry, to subvert free will. It would be remarkably dangerous. They will have to make their own choice. All of them."

"Even Molly and Arthur?" Harry said.

"Even Mum and Dad?" Ginny echoed.

"Especially your mother and father, Mrs. Potter," Dumbledore said gravely. *Mrs. Potter*, Molly jolted, and another piece of the puzzle clicked into place. *They're married*, she thought numbly through a haze of guilt, shame, and grief. He had come back in time to bring them back to life – all three of them – and she had... she had thought the worst things about him... she'd – she'd kicked him out of the Burrow.

"No need to worry about that," the older version of her Ron said. "Mum and Dad will love Harry just as much as they did this time..."

The memories ended, and Molly found herself rising out of the Pensieve and landing on the soft carpet of the sitting room. She was shaking, and she felt ill. She glanced around, not knowing if she could stand to see them... but only Dumbledore, Snape, and Sirius Black remained in the room.

"They've gone," Sirius said. "We have another safe house..."

“Why?” Molly whispered. “Why didn’t – if they had just *told* us—“

“They tried to tell you,” Sirius said harshly. “They told you every way they knew how that Harry was to be trusted. Harry saved your daughter’s life. He took a curse for Percy. He—“

Molly fell into a chair. There was a moment’s pause, and a glass of tea was placed in her hand.

“If it is any consolation,” Dumbledore said. “I think he will regret what he showed you. And how he did it. He is very angry and very hurt.”

“With good reason,” Molly said. Everyone else murmured their agreement. “After the way – the w-w-way we’ve been...”

“We deserve a lot worse,” Arthur said.

“A hell of a lot worse,” Bill echoed. Everyone nodded their agreement... except Percy, who looked more thoughtful than sad.

Dumbledore cocked his head and looked at them. “The heart-break you feel... the shame and guilt... the fact that you feel you deserve some sort of punishment... and the fact that you will hardly be able to look at him and, to a lesser extent, Ginny and Ron... these are the precise reasons why he is going to regret it.”

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Author’s Note:

I got 91 reviews for the last chapter... I’m giving you a special bonus by posting this story tonight instead of tomorrow. Well done, reviewers! (See how feedback inspires me? Hint, hint...)

Chapter 30 – The Curse

Author's Note:

There is a scene that is not meant for younger readers. It also isn't at the end of the chapter, and I've separated the normal stuff with the mature stuff with bold warnings. You can't really miss them...

Harry felt a surge of joy so strong that his heart contracted in his chest and a great lump grew in his throat. *They chose! At last! They trust me!* For a moment, Harry felt like the twelve year old on his first visit to the Burrow, and he was meeting the Weasley family for the first time. It was a fresh start...

But the instant after this bright thought occurred to him, he was pierced by a bitter truth. It could never – it would never be the same. Never, never. He had lost his surrogate family on the day he had come back from the future. He hadn't known it then, and even after his exile from the Burrow he had retained hope; but he had said goodbye to the Weasleys the day that had put up the wards. And the fact that they were here now – when it was too damn late – filled him with rage.

"WHAT THE BLOODY HELL?" Ron shouted. "Sorry, Hermione. What the bloody hell are you lot doing here?"

My thoughts exactly, Harry thought grimly. He had begun to shake, and it was slightly difficult to breathe. He stared at Mrs. Weasley – she was watching her son with an expression of great relief. *Ron, Harry decided, is not nearly angry enough.*

"What do you mean, they've chosen?" Ginny asked. She was as rigid as Harry, and it was as if he held a stiff board in his arms rather than a girl. She fisted Harry's robes and clutched it tightly. Harry wished that he had not consumed quite so much firewhiskey – he felt that he would've wanted to be less drunk for this...

"They've chosen," Dumbledore repeated. "They came to my office tonight and told me they thought Voldemort had returned – and they wished to help."

Harry took several deep breaths. The small part of him – nearly gone now – that warred with the rage and bitterness told him that he ought to take a few more. *Chosen, have they? It's a bit late, isn't it? Where were they years ago...?* “It's a bit late, don't you think?” Harry asked. *Too late, too late, too late.* “Bully for them, though. I don't think I've ever been so surprised in my life,” Harry lied. He'd been more surprised when the Weasleys had rejected him... “I thought they'd come face to face with Voldemort and still accuse their children of being evil!”

And there was the crux of it. Harry could understand a little what they thought of him. But they had turned their backs on Ron and Ginny... had forced them to leave the Burrow... had forced them to make a choice between them and him. They ought to have known their own damn children better than that. Rage swelled again, and Harry looked around almost desperately. The rational part of him was screaming at him to stop, before he said anything he would regret. But no one – not even Dumbledore – made any attempt to stop him.

“Now, listen,” Bill said sharply. Harry knew what he was going to say before he did, and he almost wished that someone would silence him. “You couldn't have expected us to know, or to trust—”

And Harry snapped. Every slight, every snide comment, every night that Ginny had cried into her pillow when she thought Harry was asleep... they all came rushing back. “THAT – IS – MY – POINT!” Harry shouted. He glanced around at those who knew the secret... they had trusted him... and the Weasleys – who should have been his champions – they had let Harry, Ginny, and Ron down badly. “LOOK AROUND! YOU SEE THESE PEOPLE? THEY DIDN'T LET ANY FUCKING ARTICLE TURN THEM AWAY BEFORE THEY EVEN MET ME! AND YOU”—Harry pointed at Molly and Arthur. *How dare they turn on Ginny and Ron?* He would curse them if he could— “OUGHT TO HAVE TRUSTED YOUR CHILDREN!”

Molly whispered something, but Harry didn't hear her. He stared at her but he didn't see. That damn rune – no doubt inspired by the amount of firewhiskey he had consumed – was all he could see. Pain, pain, pain. *If only they had figured it out before we put the wards up...* Harry had already said goodbye. This – this was far too difficult. It

was too much. And now he was going to have to tell them about the time travel, and Dumbledore and everyone would expect him to forgive them. And even though he still loved them, he did not think that was at all possible. *It's too late.*

"Not to mention what you did to our sister," Charlie said sharply. "Just because I know Voldemort's back doesn't mean I haven't forgotten that."

Harry had wondered how long it would take them to mention that. He would've bet that they'd be cringing over his terrible power first, though. He felt another surge of anger. *So now I'm okay since Voldemort's back? Suddenly they're not so afraid of me anymore?* "I'm surprised you've forgotten my terrible – fucking – power," he seethed. "What? Not so worried that I'm going to... what was it?" he pretended to think. "Lead the family down a dark and dangerous path? Not so afraid that I'm going to bewitch you?"

"No, we're—" Bill began.

"Changing your tune a bit?" Harry asked.

"Try to see it from our perspective," Arthur said.

From their perspective. Harry had spent most of his third and all of his fourth year wondering where he had gone wrong – besides touching Ginny. They hadn't trusted him, ever, not even when he had saved Ginny's life... not even when he had taken a curse for Percy. He did not know where he had gone wrong, just that he had. But there was no explanation good enough for accusing their son and daughter of being dark. "I have tried! I've tried for almost three years! But the moment you broke your daughter's heart – do you have any idea how many times she's cried herself to sleep because of you? – I stopped trying."

"Harry," Sirius said. Harry looked at him. His godfather was obviously wondering if he was going to tell them, or if they ought to just send them on their way. But Ginny squeezed his hand, and he realized that the Weasleys should have the truth because they were her family.

“What the hell is going on?” Charlie asked. “I thought our concerns were legitimate.”

If you consider turning your back on your brother and sister a good thing, Harry thought. He glanced down at Ginny and saw an unnatural sheen to her bright brown eyes.

“You understand nothing,” Ginny said. She met Harry’s eyes, and Harry found a depth of pain there that made him want to lash out. He took a deep breath, already deciding which memories would hurt them the most...

“You want to understand?” Harry said. “Albus. The Pensieve.”

Harry gathered his thoughts, sorting through memory after memory of death and destruction, love, and what Harry, Ron, and Ginny were willing to do to save them. He gave them an image of the final battle, the memorial, and the decision to travel back in time to avert the disaster. For them. He also added small memories – his favorites – of being an honorary member of the Weasley clan.

“Harry, don’t do anything you’ll regret,” Dumbledore warned.

Harry looked at the Weasleys who all appeared confused and wary. He wanted to show them what their distrust had done to their son and daughter – who had sacrificed *everything* for them – so he pulled those from his head as well. And – in the end – he wanted to show them that while they had thought Harry to be evil, he had once thought they’d be accepting and loving. He knew this would hurt them – and he wanted it to hurt them. “I can’t imagine why I would regret it.”

“Is that a Pensieve? What--?”

“Just go.”

The Weasleys did not say anything, only moved forward and fell into Harry’s memories. Harry sagged against Ginny feeling suddenly weak. The blood still thundered through his veins, but he felt dizzy from the firewhiskey.

“What did you show them?” Ron asked quietly.

There was a long silence after Harry told them.

“Harry,” Hermione said gently. “Was that wise? I think it’s going to hurt them to be shown memories like that.”

“That’s why he did it,” Ginny said. “And frankly, I can’t say that I blame him.”

“At least they’ll understand that they’ve been stupid this entire time,” Ron said.

“Still...” Hermione looked pensive.

Harry glanced at Dumbledore. “I’m *not* going to regret it. Ginny and Ron sacrificed everything for them. Everything. It was an easy choice to make, yes, and none of us would even think about regretting coming back. But their family betrayed them. They were blind. And – damn me if you wish – I’m not going to regret forcing their eyes open.”

Dumbledore did not say anything.

“I don’t want to stay here,” Ron said suddenly. “I don’t want to be here when they come out. I want to leave and go to Godric’s Hollow.”

Harry thought this was an excellent idea. “Neville – Luna, are you going to come with us?”

Luna shook her head. “Sorry, Arthur. It’s late, and we’ve got to get back to the school.”

“See you, Harry,” Neville said quietly. They shook hands and Harry could not believe that so little time had passed since they had plotted ways to kill Umbridge... and it had only been a few hours since the six Death Eaters had died.

“Sirius?” Harry said.

He shook his head. "Nah, I'm going to stay here. If they still need a few things explained..."

Harry took one last look at the Pensieve, and Apparated into the sitting room in Godric's Hollow. He wanted another drink, but he did not want to have to stay at Grimmauld Place. He did not want to see them. Harry did not know if he would ever really want to see them now that they knew.

Ginny appeared beside him, took a deep breath, and started to cry. Harry wrapped his arms around her, laid his head on top of hers, and wondered why his eyes were completely dry. Ron brought Hermione over. The four of them stood around a bit awkwardly... Harry had no idea what to say. He wished he had words of comfort to offer Ginny, but if she felt what he did, then there really were no words.

WARNING! WARNING! COMFORT SEX AHEAD!

There was only one thing that he really could do. He pulled away slightly, but before he could murmur his intentions in her ear, Hermione spoke up. "Ron," she said quietly. "Let's go to bed."

"I'm not tired," Ron said immediately. He began pacing around the room. Harry rolled his eyes. "I just can't believe it! I can't believe it!"

"Let's think about it tomorrow," Hermione said firmly. "Let's go to bed. Together."

"I already told you I—" But Ron stopped talking when he realized what Hermione was saying. His mouth fell open and his eyes widened. "You mean..."

Harry did not stay to listen to the rest of the conversation. He marched out of the sitting room and up the stairs and into the bedroom he shared with Ginny. He shut the door with more force than was strictly necessary, and cast a Silencing Charm and an Imperturbable Charm. He took one moment to whisper the Contraceptive Charm, dropped his wand, and swept Ginny up into his arms.

He pinned her up against the door and kissed her until he no longer felt anger... only desire. He lifted her higher so he could rub up against her; she wrapped her legs around his waist and made little moaning, panting sounds that inflamed him even more. He had one hand on the back of her head, and the other tore through her robes. He was not capable of slow, sweet foreplay, but when he touched her he found that she was just as ready as he was.

He pushed his robes aside, pulled his boxers down, buried his face against Ginny's neck and pushed into her, eliciting a loud moan that ended on a whimper. He adjusted her leg, wanting better access, and thrust into her again and again. The door shook with the force of it, and Harry's legs trembled with effort and pleasure.

They both lost control at the same moment and started pushing against each other without rhythm or finesse. Each time Harry embedded himself fully inside her, a loud growl escaped him and she cried out so loudly that it was sweet pain in his ears. Harry held her even closer, holding her writhing form completely still.

"Merlin – do it – I *need* – oh, sweet," Ginny sobbed incoherently. Harry thrust three more times, and she screamed and fell apart in his arms. He bit her shoulder – not too gently – at the moment he felt her tighten around him. He pulled back and pushed in once more before he shouted and climaxed.

Harry carried her over to the bed and, still joined, lay down with her. They both gasped for breath, and Harry did not know how long it took them both to recover from the sheer intensity of their love-making. "Ginny," Harry panted; he shifted a bit to take weight off of her. "You amaze me."

"That was... exactly what I needed," Ginny said. "Though I may be sore tomorrow."

"In the good way or the bad way?"

"In the very good way," Ginny murmured. Harry kissed her softly, stroking the long strands of her beautiful hair. He did not kiss her to draw out her desire again; he was not sure if he was capable of

another round at the moment. But he wanted to stall. “Can it wait until tomorrow?” she asked.

“Merlin, yes,” Harry said. He pulled out of her. “Do you have your wand?” Harry asked. When she shook her head, he sighed and got up to retrieve his own. He cast Cleansing Charms on the both of them, stripped, and crawled into bed. Ginny did the same, and he curled around her back. He kissed her shoulder – in roughly the same place that he had bitten it – and said, “Love you, bright eyes.”

“Love you too,” Ginny said. “Always and always.”

Neither of them spoke after that, though Harry was awake for several more hours. He was certain that she was as well. Ginny had helped take the edge off of his anger – it was still there, and so was the pain. But he found that he was able to think clearly. The night had deepened before Harry at last slept.

He awoke to the best feeling in the world: Ginny using her mouth on him. One moment he had been dreaming... and the next he was wide awake in all ways. He let her continue until the pressure was too great. He tugged her up, curled around her back again, lifted her leg, and entered her as slowly and gently as possible. This time was just as intense as the night before, but in a completely different way. Instead of growling and shouting, Harry murmured endless words of love in her ear. Instead of being forceful, he went as gently as he could.

Only the end result was the same.

YOU CAN LOOK NOW!

Ginny yawned and pulled on her robes as Harry headed into the bathroom to wash. He stood under the spray of the shower for longer than was typical, trying to order his thoughts before the inevitable conversation with Ginny, Ron, and Hermione. He got out, dressed quickly, and followed Ginny downstairs to the breakfast table. Ron and Hermione were already there; Ron was tucking into a huge plate full of sausage and eggs, while Hermione nibbled on toast with a dreamy expression on her face.

Sirius walked in the moment Harry opened his mouth to talk. “Your family has gone back to the Burrow – don’t look like that, they’re not angry. They’ll be going back to Grimmauld Place tonight, so if you want to see them, they’ll be there.”

“I’m not sure I want to,” Ron said darkly.

“I think you should,” Harry said firmly. Ron and Ginny turned to stare at him. “I thought about this all last night... I think you should talk to them. And I think you should forgive them.”

“Harry,” Ginny said. “I just don’t know if I – can. Or if I even want to.”

Harry struggled to hide his bitterness. *This is all their fault...* But he pushed that thought away. It was the right thing to do. He imagined that it would be very difficult for Ron and Ginny to forgive. He had seen the evidence of the wounds caused by their own parents. They ran deep. “I’m going to try, too,” Harry said. “Though I will likely find it more difficult than the two of you. Thinking their own children were evil...”

“What about how they’ve treated you?” Hermione asked.

Harry blew out his breath. “That’s impossible to forgive. Not – and I know this sounds confusing – because of what they did, actually. They didn’t *really* do anything wrong. At least not in regards to me. I’m not – I don’t...” Harry paused, frustrated. He did not even understand what he was saying. “Listen... your mum and dad, and the closeness we used to have... it’s like a dream. Just a dream. It doesn’t even exist anymore... it never existed for them. So...”

“So you’re saying that there’s nothing to forgive,” Ginny’s eyebrows slammed together. “Harry, don’t be so damn noble—”

“I’m not being noble,” Harry said sharply. “I’m not. I didn’t say that there isn’t anything to forgive. I said it was impossible. It’s a paradox... I would easily have forgiven your mother and father anything in the other reality. You know that. But those people... they don’t exist anymore – for me. For you and Ron, yes. They’re your mother and father and they love you, even if they were dead wrong about the two of you. But they’ve never been close – they’ve always

been watchful and wary – to me. And that isn't going to change. There's no magic in the world that can bring that back, that can make them remember what used to be and what might have been. So that's over and done. And," he added in almost a whisper, "I can't forgive them for that. I really, really can't."

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry spent the next two weeks avoiding Grimmauld Place when he knew the Weasleys would be there. Instead, he brooded at Godric's Hollow, tirelessly thinking of a way to encourage Voldemort to try to draw Harry out of hiding. Inspiration did not strike until just before Ginny and Ron left to visit with their mother, Charlie, and Percy. Still... it was a dangerous plan.

"Hey," he said. He scribbled Sirius' address on a spare bit of parchment. "Give this to Percy... I'd like to talk to him."

Ginny smiled. "Good. I thought he might be the first one."

"Dunno why you haven't before," Ron said. "Even if he wasn't the mad bloke—"

"—or woman," Hermione said sharply. "It could have been a woman."

"The mad bloke or the mad woman," Ron said dutifully. "It wasn't Percy, damn it." Harry already knew this; Ron had asked Percy this pressing question the first time they met again after the Pensieve.

"Just bring him by," Harry said. He did not want to tell them his seed of a plan until he had spoken with Percy. "They still haven't told anyone, yes?"

"Of course not," Ginny said. "Albus was explicit in his instructions – wait and see."

They left moments later, and Harry busied himself in the kitchen, preparing two cups of tea. In truth, he should have initiated this meeting sooner. Percy had not fallen in with the rest of the Weasleys, Harry knew. He had been cordial and had defended Harry on several occasions. That had protected Percy from the rage he had felt the

night he had shown them his memories... the fact that he did not have very close memories of Percy because of the former estrangement was the secondary reason.

There was a small *crack!* and Percy appeared. The older boy looked surprised and gratified, though he tried to force his face into stoic lines. Harry eyed him. "Would you like a cup of tea?" he asked.

"Er – thank you," Percy said. He sat at the table and stared at the mug in his hands. Harry was about to open his mouth to speak, but Percy beat him to it. "Harry – why weren't there any memories of me?"

Harry could tell that this question had burned inside him, and he wondered why he had not asked Ron. Perhaps he wanted to hear it from Harry. How did Harry explain this without stating explicitly that he had deliberately punished the Weasleys for the years of doubt and dislike?

"I know I wasn't – dead," Percy said. "At least not until... not until the end. Everything makes sense but that. And I mean everything. The closeness between you, Ginny, and Ron... the way you acted sometimes. Mum and Dad thought you were cold and hard – but the three of you sort of reminded of my uncles Gideon and Fabian. And the look in your eyes when Dad – when he sent you away from the shed. The advanced skills... *everything* is so clear that I wonder why I never saw it before. Except – in all the memories you showed us, I was never once there, only my body at the end."

"True," Harry said. "Listen, Perce... part of that was because... well, when Voldemort came back for the first time, the Ministry didn't believe it. Not at all – they claimed that I was a raving lunatic who just wanted attention. Albus was taken off the Wizengamot because he defended me—"

"Is that why you've been in hiding?" Percy asked shrewdly. "Why you didn't try to explain what had happened with Cedric?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed. "And that's why all our allies are in deep hiding... we've been working behind the scenes – but that doesn't matter at the moment. Your mum and dad, they joined the Order of

the Phoenix immediately. And you... well, you sided with the Ministry.”

Percy looked aghast. “But – *why?*”

“You placed your loyalties where you thought you should,” Harry said.

“So – for however many years... I didn’t believe that You-Know-Who was back?”

“No,” Harry said. “Voldemort – it’s a long story and part of the reason why I asked you to come – only remained hidden for about a year. After that you... I think you had a hard time knowing that you’d – you’d turned on your family. You came back, though, right before the final battle...”

Percy eyed him. “Is that why you and Ron and Ginny were so nice? You didn’t want me to side with the Ministry?”

“No,” Harry said honestly. “We wanted you to know that if you sided with the Ministry, you could always come back. Ron and Ginny reckoned that if you knew that we – er – appreciated you, you’d have an easier time of it. And don’t feel too guilty. We found out – after the battle in which you died – that you’d been using your connections at the Ministry to help Muggle-born witches and wizards to flee the country.”

Percy stared at him for long moments, ignoring his tea. “Would you – would you let me help, if I asked?”

“Perce,” Harry said. “That’s actually why I wanted to talk to you. I have an idea... but there’s a risk, and if you don’t feel comfortable—”

“I’ll do it,” Percy said immediately.

Harry grinned. “You may want to wait until I tell you. You see, we need bait for a trap...”

An hour later, Harry had outlined every risk that he could think of (including some that were extremely unlikely), and Percy was just as firm about his desire to help. Harry was reluctant – the fact that Percy

would be used as bait was a minor thing, really; but Percy's allegiance would be public. It was possible that Voldemort could go after him. But Percy was adamant, and Harry had to admit that they needed him.

"Let's go tell Ron and Ginny," Harry said. "And we'll have to ask Kreacher... Percy, are you certain?" Harry asked for the seventeenth time.

"As certain as I was two minutes ago," Percy said immediately.

Harry sighed. A thought flitted across his brain, and Harry realized that he felt exactly the opposite about Percy than he did the other Weasleys. Percy had kept himself at a distance last time, separated from the rest of his family by the virtue of having completely different personalities and interests. But now... it was the other way around. Percy was still Percy: pompous, ambitious, and a little hard to take in large doses. But his loyalty to Harry and his siblings had never truly wavered...

"All right," Harry said. "I won't ask again."

They Apparated to Grimmauld Place at the same moment. Harry felt a nervous swooping in his stomach; this was the first time he had placed himself in the same place as the other Weasleys. Fortunately, they were apparently in the sitting room; the basement kitchen was deserted.

"Ginny! Ron! Sirius!" Harry called loudly, and what sounded like a herd of elephants tromped down the stairs. He grimaced and then wiped all the expression off his face with the help of his rudimentary Occlumency skills. Sirius bounded into the kitchen first, followed by Molly, Arthur, Bill, and Charlie. Harry let his eyes slide right past them.

"We've figured out how we're going to lure Voldemort," Harry told them. "Sirius – Kreacher is going to go to Narcissa Malfoy and tell her that I've got you under the Imperius Curse—"

"What?" Sirius said blankly. "Why not just say I'm supporting you?"

“It’s an added layer of protection,” Harry said patiently. He saw the older Weasleys sit down at the table out of the corner of his eye. None of them were looking at him, which was just fine with Harry. “However, it would be unwise to put Sirius in the compromising position of my ally. Not only for right now, but for later... we’ve got to plan for the worst for the Ministry, and Sirius needs leverage. Which means—“

“We’re using Percy as bait?” Ron gaped at him. “Did you think of this all by yourself?”

Harry grimaced at him. “You know I don’t like it, but it needs to happen. We’ll take extra precautions, of course... and once Voldemort has come back into the open, Percy has agreed to move in here.”

“Why not use the Fidelius Charm on the Burrow?” Bill asked.

Harry clenched his jaw and didn’t answer.

“Because you’re going to pretend to think the same as you did when Ron and Ginny left,” Percy said promptly. “You’re going to continue to stay out of the fight – and you’re going to be disapproving. Even when everyone finds out You-Know-Who is back.”

Ginny gave Harry a small smile.

“No way,” Charlie said forcefully. “No way in hell will I—“

“You’ll do it,” Harry said firmly. “Sirius, we’re going to have to ask Kreacher if he’ll do this. And when he agrees... make absolutely certain that he knows exactly what to say. And tell him that if he is in any danger at all, he is to leave immediately. We need to act fast; Kreacher needs to have planted the information within the month.”

“And I’ll be moving out of the Burrow and into my own flat,” Percy said.

“Why Percy?” Molly whispered. “And why can’t we – why aren’t we going to be on your side?”

"It's all about doing what Voldemort doesn't expect, Mum," Ron said when Harry made no indication that he was going to answer her. "Percy is the most likely candidate to be on friendly terms with us. And if your support remains hidden, you can do things that can't be traced back to you. And we need people like you at the Ministry, Dad. And we'll need Bill to stay at Gringott's for now."

"Why Gringott's?" Bill asked. "What've the goblins got to do with this?"

"We're going to have to—" Ginny began, but she stopped and immediately frowned. She withdrew a small silver object from the inner pocket of her robes.

"—NO!" Luna's voice. "Don't—"

"It has to be done," Umbridge's voice. It sounded faint and distant, and Ginny added a charm to make it louder. "Give me that wand. Now, Mr. Longbottom. I believe you have something to tell me? Oh yes, I know you've thwarted me all year, both of you. But you *will* tell me where Harry Potter is. Right now!"

"No," Neville said.

"We're going to Hogwarts right now," Harry said. "Let's go, Ginny. Ron."

"But..."

All three of them turned on the spot and after the unpleasant sensation of being pulled through a small tube, Harry was in the tidy upper room of the Hog's Head Inn. "Ariana, we've got to get in!"

"*Crucio!*" Umbridge shouted.

Luna screamed a terrible, high pitched sound that nearly stopped Harry's heart. All three raced as fast as they could up the passageway, and into the Room of Requirement. "We need a door!" Harry yelled. "One that leads into Umbridge's office!"

"Should we Disillusion ourselves?" Ron asked.

"No need," Harry said grimly. "Dead people don't talk."

The door appeared when they were halfway across the room, and Harry reached it at a dead run and threw it open. The scene that met his eyes filled him with anger so intense that Harry had raised his wand, intending to use the Killing Curse for the first time in his life. Luna was bound tightly to a chair, and was screaming from the pain the Cruciatus Curse caused. Neville was beside her, also bound, tears of impotent rage streaming down his face. And Umbridge cast the curse, a sickening look of glee on her face. But the cool, logical part of his brain wanted answers to several questions he had. *Just a few minutes*, Harry promised himself. So when he shouted, the word that left his lips was "*Stupefy!*"

Umbridge dropped like a stone, and Luna stopped screaming. Ginny immediately unbound her and Neville.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," Luna sobbed, panting.

Neville shook with fury. He stood up with deliberate motion and raised his wand. There was a hard, determined look on his face, and Harry knew that he was about to kill the stunned woman.

"Not yet," Harry said. "*Incarcerous!*" Black ropes twined around her so tightly that they cut her skin, causing her to bleed in spots.

"*Ennervate!*" Ron said.

Umbridge's beady little eyes blinked open. Harry bent over her, and saw with grim satisfaction that her eyes widened with fear. She made little whimpering noises... she tried to move, but gasped from the pain. This did not bother Harry in the slightest. "You cunt," Harry said. "You foul, evil cunt. You're dead. You're already dead; you just haven't stopped breathing yet."

"How do you like having Harry tie you up with magic?" Ron asked. "I've got to admit, I'm really enjoying the sight. Looks painful."

Harry ignored this, though Umbridge looked even more terrified. "Don't worry," Harry said. "We already hated you before you accused me of bugging Ron. We're not going to kill you because of that."

We're going to kill you because you tortured Luna – and you tortured Neville by forcing him to watch. But first – you're going to answer a few questions."

"You can't—"

"A lot of people say that to me," Harry interrupted. "You're not the only one who is going to die surprised. Now. Tell me... how did you fool the centaurs? How did you perform a Memory Charm on them?"

"What?" Umbridge said blankly. Harry tightened the ropes until the squealed. "I don't—"

"Before you wrote the article that started the process that turned the world against me," Harry said very slowly, "you had to have done research. How did you trick Firenze? I can't imagine that you walked into that forest and called him a half-breed. You'd be dead already."

"I didn't write the article," Umbridge said. Harry twitched his wand in her face and she wet herself. The stench of urine and fear filled his nostrils.

"You have no reason to lie," Harry said, sitting back on his heels. He frowned at her... he did not like the fact that his instincts told him that she was telling the truth... she had no reason to lie. She should be boasting of it right now, as she had done when she had confessed that it had been she who had set the dementors after Harry. The world rocked a little.

"I didn't! I didn't!" Umbridge squealed.

"Who wrote it, then?" Harry shouted in her face. "Tell me, damn you!"

"I don't know! I don't!"

Ron swore loudly and fluently. Ginny made a sound like an angry cat. "I just checked, Harry. I used the Veritas Charm. I can't believe it, but she's telling the truth. She didn't write that damned article."

Harry's mouth twisted with rage as he stared down at the toad-like woman who was now trying desperately to get out of her bonds,

despite the pain. Harry stood up, pointed his wand... but before he could kill her, there was a bang and a flash of light. It hit Umbridge in the stomach, and her eyes bugged out. Her skin immediately began to turn grey, and her breath came out in pants and gasps... as if her lungs were no longer working properly. It marbled and hardened... and Harry realized that she was being turned to stone before his eyes.

It took quite a long time for the transfiguration to be complete, but five minutes later the ugliest statue Harry had ever seen lay on the floor before him. But only for a moment.

"Reducto!" said Luna, and Umbridge burst apart. The only sign that she had been there at all was a fine dust that now coated the room...

Harry turned to look at her. She was pale and trembling, but her blue eyes were rather fierce and not at all what he was used to seeing. Harry had known that Neville had hardened, but Harry had not noticed it in Luna... he felt pride and grief all at the same time.

"What a remarkable spell, Luna," Ginny said. Her voice shook slightly.

"Thank you, Guinevere," Luna said. "My father's friend taught me after my second year..."

They stood there in silence for long minutes. Ginny put her arm around Luna, who accepted the comfort gratefully. Ron put his hand on Neville's shoulder. Harry stared down at a piece of stone the size of his thumbnail. It was the biggest part of Umbridge left... *She didn't write the article... Damn it... Snape is going to be furious...*

"I suppose we're going to have to tell Albus about this," Harry said. "Did anyone know that you came here tonight?"

Neville and Luna shook their heads. "She didn't give us any time to tell anyone. And she didn't tell Fudge, we know that, because when she told us she was going to use the Cruciatus Curse, she said that what Fudge didn't know wouldn't hurt him," Neville explained.

"That makes things easier," Ginny said.

"Yeah," Ron said. "So does not having a body to get rid of..."

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Author's Note:

I really, really enjoyed killing Umbridge. And yes, I imagine being turned to stone was quite painful. Go Luna! Although I equally enjoyed having Harry call her that truly nasty word and having her piss herself. That was great! At least for me. One more chapter to go in the Year Five sequence...

Also, I swear to Merlin, I have the best reviewers ever. You guys rock, and you make the writing so much easier and faster!

Chapter 31 – Beware

Harry's heart hammered inside his chest and the palms of his hands felt uncommonly sweaty. He was alone in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, and everything was (so far) going according to plan. Harry knew that this could change at any moment – Merlin knew that almost everything had gone wrong. But Snape had provided information that Voldemort was ready to attempt to lure Harry into the Department of Mysteries... *that* had worked.

But what if the blood wards don't protect Percy? We should have made them as strong as they were at the Burrow... Harry could not help these thoughts, even though he knew that the wards Dumbledore had created were exactly what they needed. No one who was not a family member of Percy's – Harry could not even enter – could penetrate the wards without extreme pain. And whatever else the Weasleys might be, they were not supporters of Voldemort.

Yet Harry was frustrated and worried. Many different things clamored for his attention; he was actually least worried about the duel with Voldemort. Even if Harry was struck by the Killing Curse, that was hardly the worst that could happen. Indeed, every day Harry realized more and more the truth: Dumbledore had always been right. There were far worse things than death. And Harry was lucky enough to stumble across loads of them...

"Er – Harry?" Mr. Weasley's voice.

Harry gritted his teeth. With an effort, he turned his head and stared at a point on the wall several inches to the left of Mr. Weasley's head. Harry thought that he had progressed rather well from just under a month ago when he had steadfastly refused to be in the same room as them, or even the same house. He could not, however, make eye contact. It hurt too much, that first moment... it was hard to remember that this Mr. Weasley was not his Mr. Weasley, the one who had been like a father to him.

"Yes?" Harry said flatly.

"Do you know where Ron and Ginny are?" he asked.

"I expect they're at Godric's Hollow," Harry replied. He turned away; he had given all of the Weasleys the secret two days before, though he had had to fight his own bitterness.

"Is it all right if I...?"

"It isn't my house," Harry said. He wished Mr. Weasley would just leave. He didn't want to see them... he didn't want to have to talk to them. "Go if you want."

"Thank you," the older man said. But he made no move to join his children, and Harry felt a sick sense of dread. *Don't talk about it, don't mention it, and don't ask me about it.* "Harry... Molly and I – we want you to know that... we – we should have listened. We're so... we're really sorry."

This was the moment that he had been dreading since he sent the Weasleys into the Pensieve. He absolutely did not want to hear their apologies. This urge was so strong that Harry had to use all his might to not silence Mr. Weasley with his wand. "There isn't anything to forgive," Harry finally forced out. And yet he had a coiled mass of grief, pain, and anger in his belly with the Weasley name on it.

Mr. Weasley seemed to know this. "I may have been blind, but I can see that—"

"There's nothing to forgive," Harry insisted. That was the problem. Other than the way they had treated Ginny and Ron, they hadn't done anything wrong. But at the same time, they had ruined everything. There was no chance at closure; no way to resolve these issues. There could be no way of going back to the way things were because they had never been.

Harry was immensely relieved when Mr. Weasley left. He did not, *not* need another item on his plate. His invisibility cloak was still missing... Umbridge hadn't written that damn article and Snape had been forced to carry around a Portkey just in case Voldemort found out the truth and tried to kill him... they couldn't possibly make absolute certain that it had, in fact, been the Longbottoms who had erased Dumbledore's and Snape's memories, and inadvertently killed

Rookwood. There were too many damn complications. And, on top of all of that, Percy was maintaining his silence.

Harry looked sourly at his cup of tea. He found himself wishing, not for the first time, that Voldemort was not a damn Legilimens. Kreacher did not know Occlumency; therefore, they had to make sure that he told the truth as much as possible just in case... so Harry had placed Sirius under the Imperius Curse on several different occasions (Ron had done it too, though that had been primarily just for fun), they had staged a loud discussion about how glad they were that Percy was actually on their side, and also that they had not had any contact with him since the beginning.

Harry did not like the necessity of using someone he cared for as bait, and he had a horrible feeling that things would go very wrong.

The next two days were spent anxiously pacing, pulling at hair, and being soothed by Ginny. Harry was prepared to drop everything at any moment and race off to the Ministry – this time with Ginny, Ron, Hermione, and Moody all in tow. Harry repressed the urge to send Percy a Patronus practically every ten minutes. But the Death Eaters were watching, Harry knew, and no one wanted them to see how the Order of the Phoenix communicated.

It only made things worse when Percy stopped coming to work. This had been entirely expected; the Death Eaters who worked for the Ministry were quick to cast suspicion on him. Percy had had to hole himself up in his small, Order-funded home... but *what if?*

Harry wandered around Grimmauld Place, pacing, and wishing that Voldemort would get on with it. It finally happened at seven o'clock in the evening while Harry was having a shower. His scar blazed with pain, and he fell over, clutching his head. He could see Percy's face, hear Percy's screams...

He left the bathroom at a dead run, threw on underpants and a robe. "IT'S TIME!" he bellowed. Doors flew open. Remus, back from Bulgaria, came out of one of the rooms... followed by Tonks, who was remarkably disheveled. Harry probably would have laughed, but this was not the moment to tease Remus.

“You’re certain we can’t go with you?” Remus asked.

“Should I head to the Ministry?” Tonks asked at the same moment.

“Yes, I’m sure. And, no, don’t go to the Ministry... alert Kingsley and tell him to bring muffle the wards... Merlin knows we don’t want Scrimgeour showing up when we don’t want him to,” Harry said.

“But what about—“

“Ron’s father is doing that,” Harry said grimly. “It’s a good thing – it’ll look less – less – oh, I don’t know.”

“Sent the message to Dumbledore!” Ron said. “He’ll send Fawkes to Percy’s house... get him out of there... Hermione, are you sure you want to come?”

“Yes, Ronald,” Hermione said testily.

“No need to bite my head off, woman,” Ron said.

“Are we forgetting anything?” Harry asked. “Wards... Percy... Dumbledore... Ron, have you told your father?”

“Yes,” Ron said. “Just the Patronus, I didn’t make it talk.”

“Right,” Ginny said. “So now we wait.”

Kingsley’s lynx, Dumbledore’s phoenix, and Mr. Weasley’s weasel all arrived at almost exactly the same moment. Harry took several deep breaths, Disillusioned himself, and gripped Ginny’s hand while she did the same.

“Are you leaving? Is this the moment?” Mrs. Weasley sounded very anxious. “Ginny, are you sure—“

“I’m going, Mum,” Ginny said sharply. Harry took this to mean that Mrs. Weasley had attempted to talk her out of going. Apparently she did not yet fully and truly comprehend the fact that her daughter was not actually fourteen years old. Harry ignored the fact that he, too, was guilty of wanting to keep her out of danger as much as possible.

Ginny turned on the spot and took Harry with her to the Atrium. It was silent and almost completely deserted, except for two weary looking witches who were scrambling into hearths. He gazed down the long walk toward the lifts, and saw Arthur Weasley standing in one just before the doors closed. *Good*, Harry thought.

They set off swiftly toward the lifts, and rode down in tense silence. Harry could hear Hermione breathing heavily through her nose... this would be her first real taste of combat outside of a controlled environment. The lift doors opened on Level Nine; Harry gave Ginny's hand a reassuring squeeze.

Only five seconds passed before Harry realized that another set of heavy, clanging footsteps joined them. Harry's entire body tensed up, and he jerked to a halt.

"It's me, Potter," Moody said in a gruff whisper.

"Prove it," Harry said. He pointed his wand in the direction of the voice.

"Hedwig died that night too," Moody said cagily, referring to his own death.

"What're you doing here?"

"Came to fight," Moody said.

Harry paused to think about this, and then shrugged. "All right. Get Bellatrix Lestrage – don't kill her, but take her down and make sure she won't get up again for a while."

"I'm here too," Dumbledore murmured. "I like the odds of this better – six on... twelve, was it?"

Ron snorted. "More like about five hundred to twelve, Albus, with you here. Hermione wanted to get some experience..."

"I'm quite all right with Albus being here, Ron," Hermione said quickly. Ron laughed, and even Harry grinned. It felt a lot merrier to have Dumbledore here... Harry realized that they had never really fought

beside each other before. Dumbledore was either rescuing him from certain death and Harry was unable to move, or Dumbledore was... rescuing him from certain death and Harry was unable to move.

"I think this might actually be fun," Ginny mused.

They stopped in front of the door that led to the Department of Mysteries. All six of them paused for a moment. Harry was certain that the others were thinking of the ramifications of what they did this night. Harry, who had agonized over his encounter with Voldemort last year, was confident that they were doing the right thing, and relieved that this day was finally here.

Harry grasped the knob, and pushed the door open. As soon as they entered the room with spinning doors, Harry immediately lifted the charm that made him invisible. *The invisibility cloak would be so much more convenient*, he thought sourly. The room stopped spinning, and Ginny marched forward and opened the first door she came to with her wand. It was not the Hall of Prophecy, but was the room in which the Unspeakables researched time. Harry wondered what they would make of him, Ginny, and Ron using the Tears of Merlin...

Harry frowned when the door that appeared next was the one that was always kept locked... where the Unspeakables studied the most terrible force in the universe: love. Something tickled at his brain, but before it could form a real thought, the doors changed again, and Ginny opened it to reveal the Hall of Prophecy.

They formed a loose square with Harry at the head, and Ron in the rear. Ginny and Hermione walked side by side... for any Death Eaters observing them the four were completely alone. Harry could not even tell where Dumbledore and Moody were.

"Percy?" Harry called. He tried to sound panicked, but he mostly sounded like he was trying to impersonate a girl. He hoped the Death Eaters did not notice this. "Percy – where are you?"

They quickly made their way to where Harry's prophecy was. Harry thought he might have heard Dumbledore and Moody break away from them, but he could not be sure it was not the beating of his own

heart. "This has my name on it," Harry said softly. "Do you – do you think this is the prophecy?"

He reached out and grabbed it.

Quiet footsteps approached, and Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione banded together, preparing to battle. As soon as Harry could see the masks in the dim light, he shouted "NOW!"

What followed next was – and this was the only word for it – a rout. The Death Eaters had not expected to be blasted, cut, bludgeoned, or turned inside out. "Remember not to kill them, Ron," Harry had to remind him several times. The Death Eaters also did not expect to have two full-grown wizards (one of the Dumbledores) countering their ambush.

"Well," Harry said, staring down at Bellatrix Lestrange. Her eyes were glassy, and she bled from her ears... but she was still alive. Only one Death Eater had died... and that had been the case of friendly fire. "That was much easier than I expected it to be."

Ron kicked Bellatrix in the stomach; he apparently could not help himself.

"Are any of them even well enough to be Imperiused?" Ginny asked doubtfully.

"*Ennervate!*" Dumbledore said, and Nott opened his eyes. "*Imperio!*"

Nott raised his right hand and pressed his finger to his Dark Mark, and Harry thought he might have been better off with grievous injuries. He did not think the elderly man would withstand Azkaban. He couldn't muster up much pity.

"I suppose it's time," Harry said. And just to be certain that he would not be leaving his wife and friends with sneaking snakes, Harry tied them together. They were bound so tightly together that even if one of them were only pretending, that Death Eater would not be able to do anything. "Stay here until you get the warning."

Ginny gave him her blazing look, and he pressed a kiss against her lips. "I'll see you in a few minutes," Harry promised.

"I know," she said.

He walked away.

Harry had known beyond a shadow of a doubt that Voldemort would not be able to stop himself from checking on the progress of his servants, especially as one of them had pressed the Dark Mark. The lift doors opened, and the Atrium was even darker and more silent than it had been when they had first arrived. He breathed a sigh of relief that Ginny had not insisted that she come with him... he did not want her anywhere near Voldemort.

The prophecy glowed a little in the gloom, and Harry's footsteps echoed loudly. As he walked, he cast a Notice-Me-Not Charm all around the edges of where they would duel. Voldemort would be fooled into thinking they were alone... Mr. Weasley had already cast the Compulsion Charm that would encourage the Aurors and the Ministry workers not to step in. He gazed at the statue of the wizard, the witch, the centaur, and the house-elf. He grinned at the smallest figure, thinking of Dobby. It would be fitting to use this one...

Harry tucked the prophecy into his robes, and focused once more on his Obfuscumency. He had been forced to adjust it a bit... he hid the real memories he had of both times that he had come to the Ministry, planting a false one for Voldemort to find, made stronger by the fact that he wove the two memories together. He hoped it would survive the onslaught, and if Voldemort chose to possess him again...

Harry waited, as silent and still as the statue next to him. A flicker of motion caught his eye, and he saw Dumbledore standing in the shadows outside the protective circle of the charms. A moment later and the shadows seemed to coalesce, and Voldemort appeared without making a sound. It was staged perfectly... almost the instant Voldemort made his entrance Cornelius Fudge did as well, followed by Rufus Scrimgeour. As soon as he saw them, Harry pointed his wand and animated the statue of the house-elf. And he focused all his attention on the forthcoming duel.

Voldemort strode purposefully down the long Atrium... until he noticed that he was being followed. The serpent-faced man bent over the elf, and looked around. He did not notice that the Atrium was slowly filling with people who were under the compulsion to remain and bear witness. He leaned over the elf – and moment now, he would begin to move away from it, certain that it was not an obscure message from one of his followers.

“Flagrante!” Harry shouted. The little elf glowed red-hot. *“Confringo!”*

The statue exploded with the force of a small bomb and Voldemort was sent flying backward. Harry did not give him a chance to catch himself, but shouted the Blasting Curse again, sending Voldemort flying backward. He screamed a high-pitched cry of fury that gave Harry chills.

“It was stupid of you to come here tonight, Tom Riddle,” Harry stepped out of the shadows, and let the Disillusionment Charm slide off him.

“Potter,” Voldemort hissed. He had red blisters all over his face and hands from where the shards of the burning statue had impaled him. Harry felt a flash of pain from his scar – Voldemort had seen the prophecy destroyed, not knowing that Harry had tricked him. His face twisted in fury, he raised his wand almost too quickly for Harry to see—

He ducked the Killing Curse, and dived out of the way of the exploding centaur. He came out of it in one smooth movement. Harry screamed *“Sectumsempra!”* before he had even rolled to his feet once more. Harry allowed himself a moment of shock and awe when Voldemort could not spin away from the jet of light fast enough – and two fingers on his left hand spun into the air and splat on the ground. Those were cursed wounds... nothing could bring them back.

But Voldemort recovered amazingly quickly, and Harry had to duck another flash of green light. He danced around the curses, whirling this way and that in a complicated pattern that Moody had taught him months ago...

“You’re the one who shouldn’t have come, Potter,” Voldemort hissed. “You’re the one the Ministry is hunting down... they do not even have any inkling that I, Lord Voldemort, have returned again.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Harry said shortly. They were circling each other now; Harry was only dimly aware of the watching crowd... he could barely see them, and if they made sounds he did not hear it at all.

“Didn’t you want to know the fullness of the prophecy?” Voldemort asked. “That was your destiny involved as well...”

“Oh,” Harry said. He withdrew the glass orb that glowed in the dim light. “You mean this prophecy?” He did not give Voldemort time to react, but tossed it up high into the air, and used the curse he had used on the statue to blast it into smithereens. There was a haunted, howling sound, and only a fine dust rained on the floor. “I don’t need to know what it says, Tom. I’ve known for a while that I’m going to defeat you.”

Voldemort screamed with laughter and fury, though Harry could tell that he was unnerved. “You think you – a *child* – can defeat me?”

Harry answered him by shouting “*Incendio!*” and Voldemort was wreathed in flames. It only lasted for a second, and Harry dodged another Killing Curse. Voldemort was breathing as heavily as Harry... he pointed his wand – a stream of grey light arced out of it, and Harry threw up a Shield Charm as fast as he could, but he was hit in the shoulder.

He immediately felt exhaustion so intense that it was all he could do to stay standing. He partially broke the curse, but was already sweating and trembling from the effort to remain upright. Harry felt a dim surge of anger... Voldemort had deliberately weakened him. *If that isn’t cheating...*

He decided in an instant that this was all he needed from Voldemort. He flicked his wand, and let the Notice-Me-Not Charm that kept Voldemort from seeing the crowd that had amassed in the Atrium fall. The red eyes widened, and he hissed in anger... then he turned on the spot, his cloak billowing out from him like a piece of darkness,

and vanished. Harry sagged to the floor, more exhausted than he had been in a very long time, and possibly not at all in this body. It took minutes for him to catch his breath.

The Atrium was totally and completely silent, as though someone had cast a charm. The fact that Harry Potter had just dueled Voldemort appeared to have made a great number of people speechless. Harry looked at Dumbledore out of the corner of his eye. He got the impression that the older wizard wanted to start cheering. Several long moments passed and *still* no one moved. Harry shifted his weight from one foot to the other, starting to feel a little nervous. Were they going to try to arrest him? If they tried, he was going to have to put his foot down.

"Voldemort is back," Harry stated the obvious.

Fudge gaped, sputtered, and opened and closed his mouth like a fish. Mr. Weasley stood right behind him, Harry noticed. He was grimly satisfied that the man's Compulsion Spell had worked well enough that the Aurors had not attempted to curse Voldemort. Amos Diggory – and *Cedric* – were familiar faces in the crowd; he wondered if Mr. Weasley had had anything to do with that. Harry shouldn't be surprised that Cedric now worked for the Ministry... bright boys and girls who were skilled with magic often did.

"It appears," Dumbledore said slowly, "that we might owe Mr. Potter a rather large apology."

"D-D-D-Dumbledore!" Fudge whispered. "That was – that was *You-Know-Who*!"

Harry turned away and rolled his eyes. "Yeah," he said. "Voldemort's been back since June 24th. You know... the night you lot decided to arrest me?"

Dumbledore gave him a very, very sly wink. It went unnoticed by any of the others. "I take it that you used the Imperius Curse on young Mr. Diggory to protect him? But what about the – *ah*."

Moody, with his impeccable timing, chose that moment to shove through the crowd. "A mad Death Eater was impersonating me," he

growled, amidst the cries of shock and gasps. But the crowd quickly fell silent, wanting to know the truth. "Don't know which one, never saw him. But the wizard who died in the maze was the Death Eater, not me."

"But how do we know—" a young Auror began.

"You know of any ways to impersonate a dead man?" Moody growled. "Honestly, Dewitt, you ought to have studied Miss Abernathy a little less and Concealment and Disguise a little more!"

"It's him," Dewitt said, awed. "That's Mad-Eye Moody!"

"It is," Rufus Scrimgeour said, more to himself than to anyone else. He, however, had not merely taken Moody's word for it. He'd cast a spell that Harry did not know (but if it detected whether or not someone was using magical means of disguise, he probably ought to), and Moody's body had briefly flared blue. "Polyjuice won't work like that... not with a dead man. Thought it was a bit funny that he got himself killed by a Blast-Ended Skrewt. But how... how did you get your eye back?"

"I didn't," Moody said gruffly. "I made a different one."

Scrimgeour nodded, though he was still frowning.

Moody's eye spun. Several employees were slipping away... Harry had a good idea that they were leaving to Apparate to Voldemort... he was glad that Moody was marking them. Perhaps they would have new names to add to the list they had created of Death Eaters who had infiltrated the Ministry.

"I assume that you were captive somewhere?" Scrimgeour pushed.

"I was," Moody said. "I was held under the Imperius Curse and kept in my own trunk. I was moved the night before the final task... thank Merlin, or I would have starved to death... and once the Death Eater died, I was able to escape."

Harry listened as Moody lied fluently. An odd thought struck him. He remembered years and years ago before the destruction and

Voldemort's defeat... Aberforth had said that Dumbledore kept his secrets close to him. Harry was doing the same. He was glad that he had been able to pull it off so far...and he was very glad that he knew so many good liars.

Like Dumbledore.

"Harry," he said softly. "I cannot even begin to express my regret. It didn't even occur to me that things were not as they seemed. I confess that I was swept away"—Harry could see Fudge nodding like a sycophant after every two words, and would have had to work hard to suppress his grin had he not been so exhausted—"by the fact that the prophecy hinted at a terrible power. But – and I think that I speak for all of us – after what I have just witnessed, I think we can assume that the terrible power might actually be a good thing."

If Hermione finds a way for me to survive, Harry thought. "So now I'm all right?" Harry asked harshly. He swayed on his feet and only hoped that no one had noticed. He looked over the crowd... *where are Ginny, Ron, and Hermione?*

As if Harry's thoughts had summoned them, Ginny and Ron appeared and shoved their way through the crowd. Hermione was a few steps behind them. There were more gasps and cries of shock.

"Take a good look, Dumbledore," Harry said. "It's been four teenagers and Mad-Eye against Voldemort. For an entire year."

"You could have come forward," Dumbledore pointed out.

"I would have been arrested on sight," Harry countered. He put his hand on Ginny's shoulder when she reached his side. He did this to assure himself that she was in one piece, and also to help him stay upright. She was very pale. "No one would've bothered to *listen* to me, and don't try to deny it."

"Now, Harry," Fudge began jovially. "Certainly we would have believed you!"

"Don't lie," Harry said, not even glancing at him. Sparkling darkness sought to claim him, and Harry wanted nothing more than to fall into

his bed. He wondered what that spell had been that had weakened him so... was there a way to counter it? "Listen, you're not still sending me to Azkaban, are you? Good. In that case, I may be able to set aside some time to talk about this last year. But first... I'm going to bed."

"But surely you want to go back to Hogwarts!" Fudge said. "There's no need for you to – er – stay away anymore. And I'm certain the – er – Weasleys"—Fudge glanced at Ginny and Ron; Harry almost pitied the man, he looked so completely lost—"will want to see you. Dreadfully upset, they were—"

"No way in hell," Ron said flatly. "I'm not going anywhere near my mother and father."

"Neither am I," said Ginny.

Fudge opened his mouth, but Harry cut him off, hoping that politeness might do the trick. "I'm very sorry, Minister. But I'm barely standing up. I'm leaving, but I will owl you in the next few days."

Harry was pleasantly surprised when the crowd parted and let him through. He did not have the strength to Apparate, he didn't think. They would have to Floo to Grimmauld Place... his eyelids felt like they had weights on them. Ginny murmured a spell, and Harry felt slightly better. Well enough to walk on his own two feet to his bed, anyway.

"Oh!" Hermione's eyes rounded and she whirled around to face the Minister. "There are Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries... you might want to take them to Azkaban."

"Grimmauld Place," Harry whispered. He had the impression of stunned and awed faces before he whirled through green flames to the basement kitchen of his godfather's family home. He stumbled out of the hearth and landed on his knees. Mrs. Weasley – who had been sitting at the table, obviously waiting for them – made a sudden movement as if to help, but stopped herself.

Ginny, Ron, and Hermione appeared in short order. "Where's Percy?" Ron asked.

Mrs. Weasley's eyes were wide. "He hasn't come yet... I don't think he knows."

"That's impossible," Ginny said. "Dumbledore sent him a feather from Fawkes' tail... he knew that he was to come immediately after that."

Ron did not waste any time, but jumped back into the hearth, shouted Percy's address, and vanished from sight. Ginny immediately followed. Mrs. Weasley did not even hesitate and then she, too, had gone. Harry flung himself into an empty chair. His brain felt several sizes too big, and he had that horrible feeling in the back of his throat as if he were about to vomit. He did not know whether this was from worry or from the curse.

"Harry, you don't look well," Hermione said.

"I'm not!" Harry snapped. "I'm worried about Percy—"

"I meant physically," Hermione said coolly. "There's no need to snap at me."

"Sorry," Harry muttered. He really was, but he could not muster the energy to give an apology that sounded sincere.

His stomach rolled, and he was beginning to think that he might actually vomit, when Ginny and Mrs. Weasley tumbled out of the fireplace, seconds apart. Ginny's face was bloodless. "He isn't there," she said. "And there's a dead Death Eater – Travers – outside the wards..."

Harry gaped at her. "But – how the – he wasn't even inside?"

"No," Ginny said. "I assume Percy went out to meet him... we would have known if a Death Eater had tried to get in... the blood wards, you know. But Percy isn't anywhere near. I think – I think there was another Death Eater. *Why* would he leave the house? *Why*?"

Blood pounded through his brain. How could Percy have been so stupid? He knew it was risky. He had promised not to do anything heroic – he had known how important it was that he stay inside the house and let the wards protect him. It was one thing to attack and

fight if the Death Eater had infiltrated his house (though Percy had strict orders to Apparate away), but *Percy had actually left the house.*

Ron stepped out of the hearth. His face was bright red with fury and fear. “The git – left – the – house!”

Mrs. Weasley sat down at the table, placed her head in her hands, and began to cry. Ginny hesitated for a long moment, then walked over to her mother and laid her hand on her shoulder. “It’ll be all right, Mum,” Ginny said quietly. She did not sound sure of it at all.

“It won’t be all right,” Mrs. Weasley cried. “I’ve lost you – I’ve lost Ron – and now P-P-Percy might be d-d-dead...”

Ginny took a deep breath, and Harry watched her forgive her mother. His insides twisted up in knots – he wished it could be that easy, or even possible, for him... “You haven’t lost me, Mum. I don’t think—”

“I *have* lost you,” Mrs. Weasley said. “You don’t—”

Just then, there was a slight diversion in the form of Percy Apparating into the room.

Percy’s eyes were wild behind his horn-rimmed glasses. Harry felt a rush of relief the instant before the older boy rushed him, gripped Harry’s robes, and fairly lifted him off his feet. “Sub arse vu terrow! Sub arse vu terrow! Balabuls! Ubble memmle!” He laughed loudly. *I am too tired for this*, Harry thought glumly. “Lickle tupitter! Lennimerune!”

“Is he – did something happen to his mind?” Ron asked, horrified. Mrs. Weasley sobbed.

Percy shook his head furiously, though Harry suspected that he *had* lost his mind. Percy held on even tighter, and then began searching the pockets of his robes with one hand. He pulled out a scrap of parchment and a quill, wrote something furiously, and shoved it under Harry’s nose. The letters were jumbled together, backward, and did not form any coherent words.

“Er – right,” Harry disentangled himself from Percy’s grasp. Percy shoved the useless note into Harry’s pocket. “Someone get Snape over here, or Dumbledore. I’m going to bed. When you figure out just what the *hell* is going on, you can wake me up. I’m glad you’re – er – alive, Perce.”

He made it about three feet in the direction of his room before the floor rushed up to meet him and everything went black.

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Author’s Note:

The Year Five sequence is complete! I am extremely happy with this, as I have been waiting (far longer than you lot!) for the Weasleys to find out The Secret. I will confess that I originally intended (before I started writing) that the Weasleys remain in the dark until Year Seven. I’m glad I didn’t follow through with that. Also... I was extremely tempted to have Harry to ambush them and force them to look into the Pensieve pretty much right after I finished writing the chapter ‘And It All Falls Apart’. However, the Weasleys had to choose.

I’ve received many emails asking me why I allowed others to know before the Weasleys. Everyone that Harry has told chose to trust him before he sent them into the Pensieve. Just to be clear... if the Weasleys had shown any doubt at all that Harry’s motives were entirely evil during the argument that took place before Ginny and Ron left the Burrow, they would have been told about the time travel.

So... a lot of you have been asking me about the cloak, the article, etc. Yeah... not going to answer. :D I hope you will continue to enjoy the story!

On a different note, I hope you all can help me with something. I am considering changing the name of Backward With Purpose to Always and Always. A few chapters ago, a reviewer pointed out that I’m an idiot for not having that as the title. Frankly, I couldn’t agree more. I hope this does not eff up the alerts and crap. Tell me what you think!

Chapter 32 – Like Drawing In A Mirror

"You see, one gets confused with Time, when it is like that

HARRY POTTER VINDICATED! DUELS YOU-KNOW-WHO!

By Gardenia Nally

Dozens and dozens of eye-witness accounts describe the harrowing event that took place in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic: Harry Potter and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named dueled each other in a display of power not often seen. "It was like watching two giants!" said Merry Plum, of the Department of International Magical Cooperation. "I've never been more terrified in my life. But yes, it was a bit exhilarating too." (See "Great Duelists in History" Page 2)

Albus Dumbledore, who had been there in a meeting with Arthur Weasley, also witnessed the event, though he took a more somber and regretful tone. "It is a great tragedy that we, the Wizarding world, turned our back on Harry Potter and those faithful to him. We have forced him, Ginevra Weasley, Ronald Weasley, and Hermione Granger to shoulder an impossible burden." The Daily Prophet would like to say that it could not agree more. We would like to issue full apologies to Harry Potter and the others. (See "Who's to Blame for Blaming Harry Potter?" Page 3)

We were wrong about many things, including the prophecy. Harry Potter arrived at the Ministry tonight in order to stop You-Know-Who and his crowd of Death Eaters from obtaining it. After He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named left the Ministry (after coming off the worse in the duel), the Aurors were dispatched to the Department of Mysteries, where they found twelve incarcerated Death Eaters. Several of them were the escapees from Azkaban (including Bellatrix Lestrange), though perhaps the most prominent was Lucius Malfoy. (See "Ministry Money Man Secret Worshipper of Evil" Page 8)

It is also believed that the disappearances and deaths over the last year should be attributed to You-Know-Who rather than Harry Potter, perhaps the most tragic of these being the murders of Xenophilius Lovegood and Augusta Longbottom. Two lone voices of support were cruelly silenced. It is believed that several disappearances and

deaths (such as Dolores Umbridge, Simon Mountney, Jack Butler, Ollivander, Aggie Lafferty... for a full listing, see page seven) were due to refusal to serve You-Know-Who. The Daily Prophet would like to caution everyone to be especially wary.

Harry awoke slowly, wondering why his head and body felt so funny. It tingled and he felt rather weak, as if he had recovered from the flu. *Have I been sick?* Harry was confused and muddled and he did not quite know where he was. He was lying in a bed, and judging by the light coming from the windows, it was the middle of the afternoon.

A bustling sound caught Harry's attention, and he shifted his head slightly to see who it was—

"Molly!" Harry said with great relief. "Thank Merlin you're here! Have I been sick? Where is everyone?"

He stumbled up out of bed, and threw his arms around her. He had been having the worst nightmare, but as soon as he had seen her familiar, loving face all the lingering fear slipped away. He couldn't help but grin, weak though he was. "Is everyone else here too?"

Molly froze, and an expression that Harry did not understand crossed her face. The smile slipped from his face and turned into a frown. Why was she so obviously uncomfortable? What was—

The memories returned to Harry with a vengeance, and it was as though the room had been plunged into darkness. This was not *his* Molly. It had not been a dream, and Harry felt tricked and cheated. "Would you please get Ginny, Mrs. Weasley?" Harry murmured, and took a large step backward.

"You can call me Molly—"

"No, I can't," Harry said. *Molly is dead; she's been dead and buried for more than a decade.* He felt angry and desperately uncomfortable. Why was she even in here? For a moment he had thought that the last twelve years had been a terrible dream... his stomach rolled and his face flushed. She looked very hurt, and Harry did not want to have to see that, so he lay back down. *She deserves it,* Harry thought sourly.

It seemed like forever before he heard her leave, but it only took a few moments before Harry realized that he did not want to sit in bed and wait. He swung his legs over the side, and walked on shaking legs – *just how long have I been sick, anyway?* – out the door. He immediately heard Snape's voice, low and urgent. Harry managed the stairs well enough, though he had to push himself off the wall.

He was just about to enter the sitting room when Ginny came rushing out and ran smack into him. He swayed dangerously and propped himself up on the wall. "Harry!" she said. "You're finally awake... you shouldn't be out of bed, though..."

"How long?" Harry asked.

"Over two weeks," Ginny replied.

Harry's jaw dropped. He was about to say something along the lines of "what the hell?" when Percy poked his head out. "Harry? You're all right?"

"Are you?" Harry asked. "You're not – not – you know, completely insane anymore?"

"He recovered the next day," Ginny murmured. "But he doesn't remember anything that happened."

Harry groaned. "Not again. I'm sick of Memory Charms, Ginny; I really am. I think we ought to lobby for them to become Unforgivables."

"It wasn't a charm, apparently," Percy said. "It was Forget-For-Now Potion—"

"That doesn't cause insanity," Harry pointed out. Once, a long time ago in Harry's first fourth year, the twins had given Forget-For-Now Potion to Minerva McGonagall in order to get their entire class out of a particularly vicious test. It had not worked, as the twins had apparently not been paying attention to Snape when he said that it took hours to go into effect, but the third-years had had a week without homework.

“No,” Ginny said. “That was a separate jinx. We think whoever did it wanted to be certain that Percy could not tell anyone something before the potion kicked in.”

Harry did not even bother asking who. It seemed useless to him to even try to find this person. Look at how many people remained cloaked in secrecy: the author to the mysterious article, the person who had stolen Harry’s cloak and (possibly) cast the other Patronus, the two people who had forced Rookwood into the Unbreakable Vow, the benevolent presence in the Ministry...

“Any way to counter it?” Harry asked flatly. He already knew the answer.

“Not without the trigger,” Percy said. “If the person decides never to use it... I’ll always have the blank spot in my memory.”

“Do you have any idea why you’d leave your house?” Harry asked.

“I can’t think of a reason, no,” Percy said. His brow was furrowed with thought. “Believe me, Harry; I have thought about this since I woke up and Ron explained to me what had happened. I wish I could provide further clarification, but I knew very well that I was not to leave the house until Fawkes sent his message.”

“He couldn’t have been hit with the Imperius Curse, could he?” Harry frowned. “He couldn’t have been... not through those wards...”

“I wonder if You-Know-Who used similar bait for me as he did with you,” Percy said. “It is possible that if a Death Eater tortured someone on the street in front of my window, I would have been inspired to leave.”

“It doesn’t make sense, though,” Harry said. “Voldemort had already lured me to the Ministry – he used false images... he didn’t *need* you, not really—“

“Harry, the body outside of Percy’s house had been dead for over a day before we found it,” Ginny said. “And yes – that means Percy was likely missing for that time. And no – we have no idea where he

went after he killed the Death Eater. Or who met him. Or anything, really.”

“My head hurts,” Harry said. Ginny gripped his arm tightly and led him into the sitting room. Everyone had gone quiet.

“Glad to see you up, mate,” Ron said. Neville, sitting beside him (Harry realized with a jolt that he had likely slept through the rest of the school term), nodded. Luna hummed, twirled a strand of dirty blond hair, and stared at him. At moments like these, Harry could not imagine her using that rather vicious spell to kill Umbridge.

All of the Weasleys were also in the room, along with Fleur Delacour, Remus, Tonks, Sirius, and Snape. Harry wondered vaguely where Dumbledore and Moody were. Fred and George slipped off the couch and onto the floor, and Harry and Ginny took their seats. There was a loud chorus of “Thank Merlin”... “It’s about time”... “Don’t ever do that again”...

“Anything happen while I was sleeping?” Harry asked. Everyone exchanged darkly significant looks. “Can I take that as a ‘yes’?”

“Harry... Voldemort killed the Dursleys,” Ginny said gently.

Harry gaped at her. *The Dursleys are dead?* He honestly and truly did not have any idea how he felt about this... mostly he felt the same as when he did when he heard that Voldemort killed others: regret and rage. It was spiced a little with the knowledge that the last remaining link to Harry’s mother (besides himself) had gone from the earth. He should have expected this, really... he ought to have spared them a thought, but they had not crossed his mind since he had left them the summer before his fourth year. He wondered if he would grieve for them, and thought that he probably wouldn’t. No more than any other death, at least.

“No one knows, Potter,” Snape said. “The Dark Lord told me in confidence... it would be unwise to publicize this.”

Harry’s lips tightened. “And what else has Voldemort been up to while I’ve been asleep?”

“He continues to subvert the Ministry,” Snape said. “The number of those under his command is vast... he is, as of now, working to bring it down and take control. He has servants in every department of the Ministry – except for the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department, I believe—”

“As neither I nor Argus Perkins follows You-Know-Who, we can be sure of that,” Arthur said.

“He wouldn’t want it, anyway,” Ron said. “When he takes over the Ministry, he’ll likely start a department devoted to slaughtering Muggles.”

“That day might come sooner than last time,” Snape said. “We know that Dumbledore has suspected that the increased turmoil and the general stupidity of the Wizarding world would lead to this.”

“This is what we wanted,” Harry murmured. “The faster he takes control, the sooner we can bring him down. I don’t like that he has larger numbers, though...”

“We’ll just have to take more of his followers out,” Moody growled. He did not look as though he were averse to this idea. “Ambush ‘em like we’ve been doing, but all the time.”

“Some of them are under the Imperius Curse,” Harry said. “We don’t have the kind of resources to engage in that kind of warfare without killing innocents. Kingsley and Tonks can’t trail every single Death Eater, and we can’t have the Ministry do it because there are too many spies. And Snape might be revealed. That would be far too dangerous, I think.”

“You didn’t seem so concerned when it was Percy’s arse on the line,” Charlie muttered.

Harry was immediately dancing on the ragged edge of rage; he immediately began practicing Occlumency. This did not help. *How dare he?* Harry had done everything he could to keep Percy safe... they all had. Percy had known the danger, had volunteered for it. He kept attempting to close his mind, but the control kept slipping away.

“Shut the hell up, Charlie,” said Ron.

“Harry would *never*—“

“I just find it a little odd,” Charlie interrupted Ginny loudly. “I find it a little odd that it just *had* to be Percy. Why not Sirius or Remus, for the love of Merlin?”

“Charlie,” Percy said quietly. “I didn’t have a problem with—“

“You were in danger, Perce,” Charlie said. “You could’ve *died*. That nutter who hexed you could have just as easily killed you.”

“Charlie, we’re all in danger,” Ron said. Harry clenched and unclenched his right fist. “This is *war*.”

“I know that,” Charlie snapped. “I’m not stupid. Which is why I find it funny that Harry here chose a Weasley to use as bait for effing *You-Know-Who*! It isn’t a secret that he hates us. Maybe he thought the Weasleys needed to be punished for not *choosing*, for not *trusting*, and Percy would be a pretty good sacrifice—“

Harry had raised his wand and blasted Charlie backward before the word ‘sacrifice’ had left the other wizard’s mouth. Hot blood pounded through his veins. His thoughts weren’t even coherent. *How dare – I would never sacrifice Percy – fuck him.*

“*Protego!*” Sirius shouted, and the Shield Charm erupted between Charlie (who had staggered to his feet, and was now pointing his own wand at Harry) and Harry. Harry was dimly aware that people were talking loudly. He felt a hand clamp around his elbow – it was too large to be Ginny’s hand – and he made to shove it off, when he realized it was Snape who was now steering him out of the room.

Sirius followed, but he must have told everyone else to stay back, because Harry found himself alone in the kitchen with Snape and Sirius. “Let’s go to Grimmauld Place,” Sirius said. “We’ll have more privacy... and I wouldn’t say no to a glass of firewhiskey.”

“You really ought to take that elf in hand, Black,” Snape said.

There was the familiar squeezing sensation, and Harry found himself in Kreacher's domain.

"Kreacher knows that he owns me," Sirius said cheerfully. "But thanks for the advice, Snivellus."

Snape scowled. Kreacher appeared out of nowhere. "Ah, Master Harry! Feeling better? Can Kreacher get you anything?"

Harry sat there, numb, while Kreacher bustled around. "I wasn't going to kill him, if that's what you think," Harry said heavily. He stared at the glass of amber liquid, but did not drink. His limbs still felt weak from his cursed illness, and he did not want to know what kind of affect the alcohol would have on him. He looked around the room, and noticed (for the first time) that Grimmauld Place had been cleaned out of the remaining gloom.

He found himself sort of wishing that he could hide in one of the long, flickering shadows that had been so much a part of the Grimmauld Place he used to know.

"We know you wouldn't have killed him," Sirius said. "And – just so we're clear – I am fully on your side. And not just because I'm your godfather... although I found it highly offensive that they would kick a thirteen year old out of their home."

"And I have found them similarly annoying," Snape added.

Harry gaped between the two of them. "Did you actually *plan* to have this conversation? Is this a discussion?"

"It is," Sirius confirmed. "You're very bitter, Harry."

Harry slumped forward in his chair, wishing he could escape. Not for the first time, he wondered when the world had turned upside down. Grimmauld Place was far more of a home to him than the Burrow. He was actively hoping for the swift takeover by Voldemort of the Ministry. He had just cursed Charlie Weasley... and wished to do so again. *And Severus Snape and Sirius Black had agreed on something.*

"I am," Harry said. "I can't seem to stop it."

“The funny thing about bitterness,” Sirius said, “is that it can be a choice.”

“I agree,” said Snape.

Harry stared at them. Did they know how ironic it was that these words came from the two of them? Sirius, who had been so bitter that he had unwittingly led to his own death? Or Snape, whose bravery had only been revealed after the fact, because his hatred of Harry had shrouded his loyalties? He did not say this, but the other men seemed to guess his thoughts.

“I know what you’re thinking, Harry,” said Sirius.

“Potter,” Snape toyed with his glass and scowled. “I did not like the man I saw in your memories.”

“Neither did I,” Sirius said. Harry’s sense of the surreal grew steadier by the minute. “I was bitter, resentful... I was drinking too much...”

“And we ultimately died because of that bitterness,” Snape said. Harry thought it very ironic that Snape’s tone practically dripped with bitterness. Harry gritted his teeth, and the rational part of his brain told him that he had to talk to them... for his own sanity...

“Believe me, I realize the Weasleys treated you poorly—“

“That isn’t it,” Harry said. “Well... not completely. It’s... difficult to explain. I’m bitter because – because it’s too late. It’s too late to build any sort of relationship with them. It won’t happen, and it used to mean the world to me. Nothing – no one could replace my mum and dad... but Molly and Arthur... they treated me like another son. And Bill and Charlie and the others were like my brothers.”

“Are you sure it’s too late, Harry?” Sirius asked. “You have your whole life—“

“Except that I don’t,” Harry said. He blinked rapidly, and he felt sick to his stomach. He had not wanted to tell Sirius this, but Harry felt like this was strangling him... and it had been since the Weasleys had

walked into Grimmauld Place. "Sirius... the day – the day that – *shit* – I'm not going to survive this, I don't think."

"Of course you're going to survive," Sirius said bracingly. "You've got all of us helping you, don't you? Voldemort isn't going to kill you."

"You don't understand," Harry said. "The only way that Voldemort can be defeated is if I die. He has to kill me. Otherwise he won't die. Sirius... I'm a Horcrux."

Sirius blanched. "What – last time, how did you..." he whispered.

"I had three items called the Deathly Hallows," Harry said. "It made me Master of Death... when Voldemort used the Killing Curse on me – again – it didn't work properly because I was protected. But... one of the Hallows is destroyed – it also was a Horcrux – and my dad's cloak has gone missing... and the Elder Wand – Dumbledore has that, and I have no intention of taking it away from him."

"So... I've been thinking about the 'terrible power,'" Harry said. "And I think it's terrible because I've got no chance of surviving. Hermione's looking for ways... but I don't think..."

"Are you absolutely certain of this?" Snape asked.

"As certain as I can be of anything," Harry said.

"There isn't any other way at all?" said Snape.

"I'll keep looking – I promised Ginny – but... I don't think so," Harry said. "So... I know it's selfish and stupid... but I wish that the real Weasleys could be here. I wish... I really, really wish that I could've died for them. I'm going to do it regardless – I'm not a coward, and I know what I've got to do – but..." his voice trailed away. "It would just be a lot easier. It would feel less... terrible. They don't – they don't really like me, not really. They were sort of forced into it."

"Harry," Sirius' lips were white. "I want you to promise me something. You had better do everything in your power to survive this, do you understand me? I don't care if you've got three hundred Horcruxes

inside you. You'd better make every effort to get rid of it without dying."

"All right," Harry said. "I already promised Ginny, but..."

"Promise again," Sirius ordered.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

The morning of Harry's sixteenth birthday had a wonderful start. Ginny woke him up and gave him his first gift – with the business of the last month, they had not had much time for slow, easy love-making. But they made time, and Harry hummed afterward as he showered and readied himself for the rest of the day.

He blindly reached for robes, and pulled them on. He wondered if Sirius would insist on searching for more and more methods of surviving the Killing Curse. His godfather had been quite fiendish about it, actually; Hermione had likewise been galvanized into action, though she remained ignorant of the fact that Harry was a Horcrux.

"Harry?" Ginny asked. "Do you happen to have a quill on you?"

Harry slipped his hands into his pockets to check, but all he found was a scrap of parchment. He was about to toss it and go hunt down a quill for Ginny, when he remembered that this must have been the parchment Percy had written on after he had been jinxed. *Maybe I'll be able to decipher it*, Harry thought, though he did not really believe it. He unfolded it, and was not surprised to find that it was still written in indecipherable symbols.

He flipped it over, ready to take a quick look just to make sure before he tossed it in the bin, and was surprised to find small, tight writing. He squinted at it. "Hey, Ginny?" he said. He held the note out to her. "Can you read this?"

"Too small," Ginny looked at it. "Try enlarging it."

Harry did so and quickly read it. Then he read it again.

To the ones who used the tears, and those who chose to believe:

'You see, one gets confused with Time, when it is like that. All one's tenses get muddled, for one thing. If you know what is going to happen to people, and not what has happened to them, it makes it difficult to prevent it happening, if you don't want it to have happened, if you see what I mean? Like drawing in a mirror.'

"Er – Ginny?" Harry said. He held it out to her again. "Someone is effing with our heads again."

A half an hour later, everyone who knew about the time travel (except Snape) was congregated around the table in the basement kitchen of Grimmauld Place. Kreacher had outdone himself in the preparations for Harry's birthday breakfast, but Harry could not concentrate on the food. He tapped his foot impatiently, wondering where Snape was and why he was two minutes late.

No sooner had the sour-faced Potions Master appeared than Harry leapt to his feet.

"Giving a toast, mate?" Ron smirked. "It is the Chosen One's birthday after all."

"Shut up, Ron," Harry said distractedly. "We've received a message from – from someone. I think it's the person from the Department of Mysteries – the one who did the Shield Charm, Kingsley. But – it might not be."

"A message?" Dumbledore asked. "How was it received?"

Harry waved the scrap of parchment. "I found it in my pocket. Remember how Percy tried to write me a note? I'd completely forgotten about it. I found it today... and I found writing on the back. It was addressed to us – *all* of us."

Ginny read it out loud. No sooner had she done so than Hermione shrieked, clapped her hand over her mouth, and used the Floo to get back to Godric's Hollow. Harry watched this, both astonished and mildly amused. If he hadn't heard her distinctly shout the address of Sirius' home, he would have thought that she'd run off to do research in the library at Hogwarts.

He and Ron exchanged exasperated glances.

Dumbledore reached out for the message and Harry handed it to him. The older man's brow was furrowed with concentration and puzzlement. "This line is somewhat familiar. I think I've read it before, but *where*?"

"From a Muggle book called *The Once and Future King*," Hermione said. Harry jolted; he had not seen her return. She slammed a thick book down on the table. Harry recognized it immediately: *Memories Unbound*. "That exact quote"—she flipped pages until she came to a blank page with only a few words on it—"is right here. It introduces the time travel section... honestly, Ron, you act as though you've never even seen this book before! Don't tell me you haven't read it?"

"I flipped through it!" Ron said defensively. "But mostly I looked at the Tears of Merlin stuff."

Hermione's lips twitched. "By 'flipping through it' do you mean 'ignoring everything else but what you need'?"

"Now is not the time for foreplay," Harry said sternly. He grinned when Fred choked on his pumpkin juice. "Albus... what do you think this means? Is it from our mysterious friend at the Ministry? And what'd he do with Percy?"

Dumbledore was silent for long moments. "I think it is a safe guess. We suspect that someone else knows about the time travel, it is also possible that they know the method. Though I can't think *how*..."

"What if someone else is traveling time?" Fred asked. "Doesn't that make more sense? I mean... how could someone just guess that? But if they already knew..."

Harry felt the immediate urge to get up and beat his head against the wall. If there was, indeed, another time-traveler... what on *earth* could they possibly be doing? What were they trying to manipulate? The scene in the Ministry implied that *if* someone was using time to change things, then they were trying to help Harry... but why weren't they trying to do *more* to help?

He glared at the twins. "If there is another one of us, I think it's one of you," he said grimly. Fred and George looked astonished. "Who else would try to fuck with our heads like this?"

Ginny snorted.

As one, they all turned to Dumbledore, who had taken off his glasses and was now pressing his fingertips to his forehead. The silence was so thick that Harry could hear Kreacher scurrying around upstairs. He felt as though there ought to have been some sort of ominous sign, like a sudden thunderclap or a piercing siren.

"I do not know why everyone expects me to have the answers," Dumbledore said. "I assure you that I am quite as mystified as you."

"It's because you're Albus Dumbledore," Ron said. "And all we have to do is sit back and wait for you to figure it out."

Dumbledore stood and began to pace around the kitchen. Harry watched him. Occasionally he would mutter to himself, though Harry could not quite hear the words. At one point, he flipped through every page of *Memories Unbound*; he set it back down again without a word. "I do wonder," he said finally, "how many copies of that book there are. It is quite, quite extraordinary."

"We think so," Ginny said, indicating the three of them.

Dumbledore did not reply, but continued to pace back and forth. Harry sipped his tea, his own thoughts racing. Every time he thought he had the solution, it slipped away, and he felt even more confused than before. He understood the fact that the Shield Charm had saved Harry, but there had been other instances when Harry could have used a helping hand. And why the deal with Percy?

"I believe," Dumbledore broke the long silence. "I believe that it is almost certain that it is one of us here in this room. Harry, you do not intend to tell anyone else, correct? We are the only ones?"

"Correct," Harry nodded.

He wiped a hand over his face. “But *why* has this person not shown himself?”

“Maybe we’ve got to *choose*,” Charlie said; his voice was heavy with sarcasm. “But if it turns out that You-Know-Who is secretly working toward his own downfall, and we’ve just got to *trust* him, I’m going to pack up and move to Chile. This is *insane*.”

Harry surprised everyone (including himself) by barking out a short laugh. Though he had apologized (stiffly, though it was the best he could do) to Charlie, their interactions had been even frostier than usual since Harry had hexed him.

“Let’s go tell him right now,” Ron said. “Then we’ll know *everything*. He’s been manipulating all of us into thinking he’s an evil git... but really he’s – he’s saving the world from this even *more* evil git—”

Luna laughed so hard and for so long that Kingsley and Tonks – who had not had the opportunity to spend much time with her – began to look as though they wanted to give her a Calming Draught.

“Don’t be silly, Lancelot,” Luna said. She beamed around at them, and Harry had the sudden feeling that she knew better than any of the rest of them what was going on. “It’s not Voldemort... it’s Merlin!”

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Author’s Note:

The title is remaining the same. Thanks to Jack for the asides... and the advice. For those who haven’t found their way to Furious Angels yet (by Worldmaker), I suggest that you do so.

Just to let you know, I may be taking a few days off.

Chapter 33 – Memories Unbound

“Honestly, Luna,” Hermione rolled her eyes. Apparently she had not had the same revelation that Harry had. But there was something in Luna’s eyes that made Harry think that it would be very stupid of him to discount what Luna just said.

“Hold on, Hermione,” Harry said. He eyed Luna. “Do you know Merlin, Luna?”

“Sometimes,” Luna said promptly.

“Sometimes?” Harry asked. “Why only sometimes?”

“Well... I only really know him when I’m meeting with him,” Luna said. “But then he gives me the Forget-For-Now Potion so I’ll forget.”

“Why do you let him give it to you?” Harry said patiently. Then he was struck with a horrible thought. “He doesn’t *force* you, does he?”

“No,” Luna said. She stared off into space. “No, I’m pretty sure that he wouldn’t try to force me to do anything.”

“But you don’t know?” Ron said. “Luna!”

She cocked her head. “I think he must be pretty convincing, don’t you?”

“Considering the fact I’ve never met him,” Ron said through gritted teeth. “I can’t imagine how convincing he may or may not be.”

Hermione looked completely bewildered. “But it can’t *possibly* be Merlin. That’s *impossible*. There’s no way that the most famous wizard of all time – who would be ancient – is involved in this. I simply can’t imagine how that could be true.”

“What if this person had the Philosopher’s Stone?” Percy said pragmatically. “If Merlin had it—“

“Nicolas Flamel was the only maker of the stone,” Dumbledore said quietly. “And Merlin was never known for his prowess at alchemy. He had other interests.”

“Like manipulating time,” Sirius said. “Everyone knows that. But how could he still be alive? As far as I know, there isn’t anyway to travel to the future.”

Harry’s thoughts raced; everyone else was taking Luna far too literally. Practically the moment he, Ginny, Ron, and Luna had been alone together at the Burrow, she had announced that she thought they were a trio of long-dead historical figures. She called him ‘Arthur’ far more often than she called him ‘Harry’... Harry was willing to bet that her Merlin had a different one as well. He glanced around at the familiar faces... he had a feeling that if Luna spoke Merlin’s real name, he’d know it. And it would belong to one of them.

“Who is it, Luna?” Harry asked. “What’s Merlin’s real name?”

“I don’t know,” she answered. “I’ve forgotten. I always do... it gets a bit frustrating, actually.”

“You think?” Ginny said. She was gaping at Luna. “Do you mean to tell me that you let him wipe away your memories repeatedly? Luna... why – why haven’t you said something about this before?”

Luna shrugged. Harry resisted the urge to bang his head against the wall. “Just because I don’t remember his reasons,” Luna said, “doesn’t mean that they aren’t good ones.”

“But why wipe your memories in the first place?” Harry said. He sat up even straighter. “Is that why you were missing from the Marauder’s Map right before Christmas? Were you meeting with Merlin? He *is* the one who cast the Shield Charm, right?”

“Oh yes,” Luna said. “He had to give me my Christmas present. It was quite, quite wonderful. Just the thing I needed after – after Daddy died.”

“What was it?” Ron asked. He appeared unable to stop himself from asking.

Luna shrugged again.

Harry groaned.

“Luna,” Dumbledore said gently. “Do you know if this person is indeed an ally? Do you know what his motivations are? Do you know why on earth he won’t reveal himself to us?”

“No,” Luna said immediately. “I don’t know what he’s doing.”

Harry glanced around at everyone. He suspected that whoever it was that was either helping them, hindering them, or screwing around with them was male. Luna kept using the male pronoun, though he supposed it could be another smokescreen. But for the sake of his sanity, he decided to strike the girls off his list of suspects. One of the men in this room had thought the need so great that they had traveled back in time—

“But how did Merlin do it?” Ron asked. His brow was furrowed. “We know he didn’t use the Time-Turner, and I’m pretty certain that – did one of you use the Tears of Merlin? Besides me, Harry, and Ginny, I mean?”

Everyone shook their heads. Harry looked at them sharply; no one betrayed any sort of guilt or lies... but if one of them *had* used the Tears of Merlin, they’d probably be pretty good liars.

“It could have been another manner of time travel,” Dumbledore said. He took a sip of tea as if everything were completely normal. “There are other methods, I believe.”

“There are,” Hermione said immediately. “Several... but I wouldn’t think that any of them would work—”

“That’s what you said about the Tears of Merlin,” Ron reminded her. “You said that you couldn’t imagine being that desperate... you said that the author was completely mental.”

Hermione flushed. “Times have changed, I suppose,” she muttered. “Anyway,” she said in a louder voice. “The book has a list... it’s sort of an introduction to the time travel section, right after that quote.” She

flipped the page. "I've done additional research, and I haven't found any other methods... so I think this is what we have to work with."

She cleared her throat, and began to read out loud.

Time: An Introduction

The Wise Asp

Time is far more fragile than any normal witch or wizard would suppose, which is why this particular subject is kept under close scrutiny in the Department of Mysteries. The Unspeakables – taciturn and tight-lipped on the best of days – refuse to even acknowledge the fact that using a Time-Turner is the absolute least powerful way to change things on a grand scale. Brace yourselves, for I am about to open your eyes to a world that you did not think possible.

Time-Turners: *are useful in certain situations. They were created by a wizard by the name of H. G. Wells. He was not, as it turns out, an Unspeakable. This made life very uncomfortable for the inventing wizard, as the Unspeakables were forced to make him forget about his own invention. They were far too enthusiastic with their technique, and poor Wells was so confused and muddled that he became quite convinced that he was a Muggle. Interestingly, he became an author who wrote about time travel. All that aside, Time-Turners are actually fairly useless. Only a minimum of changes can be made.*

Tempus Luminas: *can send a body physically back in time, though the appearance of the body is quite frightening (according to eyewitness accounts). It causes physical weakness and great age. If one were to travel back fifteen years, for example, at the age of twenty, the physical appearance of the individual would be that of three hundred. Very little can actually be done with this method, as the body will rapidly disintegrate over the course of one week, and it is only on the first day that anything can truly be done. I would advise everyone reading this to think very carefully before creating the potion and using the rune and charm that would allow this to happen. However, the method is clearly outlined on page 296.*

The Waking Death: *is the foulest known method of time travel, and the only one that I will not give specific instructions to. This is also,*

unfortunately, the most easy to trace method. The Auror Department of the Ministry of Magic works closely with the Department of Mysteries when a pregnant witch is found dead. The full details will not, of course, be given, but know this: it involves possession, soul-subversion, and a complete lack of conscience. The Waking Death method has been used (to the best of our knowledge) six times in the course of British history. Each time left a wake of dead bodies and tears: the Middlefont Uprising and the Endrow Massacre are the two most famous occurrences. Perhaps the most reassuring aspect of this is that this method can only be used once, and the physical body of the perpetrator (which emerges from the woman's body as an infant and reaches physical maturity in exactly seven days) will have only one day (with fully intact magical capabilities) to act in the past.

The Trojan Horse: is generally considered dark magic. It is blood magic, and it requires a victim and a perpetrator. The victim is bled at regular intervals and a spell (see page 312 for the full details) is enacted to allow the perpetrator to send his own consciousness back into the body of the victim. The spell only lasts from the new moon to the full moon. The last (known) person to use this was Leander Millings, who possessed the body of his younger brother, traveled ten years in the past, and used his brother's body to murder his father. There is no limit to how often this can be done, unless the victim is permanently incapacitated.

The Gateway: is so passive of a method of time travel, that some do not even consider it time traveling at all. In the Department of Mysteries (and six other undisclosed locations), there is a gateway that allows one to step into the past and view it. Primarily, this is used as a way to detect illegal use of time travel, as those sections of the time continuum that have been changed will have the changes superimposed on the shadow of the truth. The traveler can watch, but cannot change anything.

Foci Memoria: is the method by which a time traveler enters a Pensieve (of which there are only twenty three in the entire world), and enters the memory (retaining a physical body). This is the easiest way for Unspeakables to study the effects of the time paradox, though on a very small scale. It is also exceedingly dangerous to the traveler, as the memory of a certain event is set and bound by rigid

constraints (not unlike those of a Time-Turner) and if one tries to act in a manner that is not confined by the laws of the Pensieve, it could cause death. Those nations without a Gateway (of which there are many) use the Foci Memoria method to study the recent past, and do not attempt to change anything at all. It is also limited in that one can only stay inside the Pensieve from one new moon to the next.

The Tears of Merlin: *is quite possibly the most complex, the most dangerous, and the most fascinating of the methods. Many believe that it is impossible, and that it is a fairy tale or part of the legend about King Arthur and those who followed him. But! There is documentation that King Arthur, his Queen, and Lancelot du Lac used the Tears of Merlin. The tale we know of Camelot and the defeat of Mordred is almost certainly not the whole truth – and not only because written records were scant in those days. It is said that Merlin devised a way to change everything after the destruction of Camelot, and King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, and Lancelot du Lac fearlessly set forth on this new challenge. I have spent the last several years of my life researching the steps required to use this, and the fullness of it is presented on pages 394 to 412. It does not, in fact, send physical bodies back in time, only memories. It can theoretically be done with only one person involved, but it is my belief that that sort of undertaking would truly be impossible.*

Harry's head hurt slightly by the time Hermione reached the end of the introduction the Wise Asp had written. He tried to remember if he had ever read this before; he suspected that he hadn't. It was most probable that Hermione had the right of it; Harry knew for certain that he had glossed over (at best) the other methods of time travel. He hadn't even bothered to read this... had only skipped straight to the Tears of Merlin.

"This wizard sounds insane," Fred said. He was looking at Ron with something like awe. "I can't believe you did what he said."

"Completely mental," George added.

"We were pretty desperate," Ginny said quietly.

“I’m starting to think we’re a little insane,” Ron said cheerfully, cutting through the sudden tension. He tousled Hermione’s hair. “Next time I let Harry talk me into doing something this bizarre—“

“It was *Harry* who came up with this?” George said incredulously.

“You didn’t show them that memory?” Ron said, disappointed.

“I – er – forgot,” Harry said. His lips twitched.

Ron started laughing. “Looking back, that’s one of my favorite parts. We were all drunk off our arses... Kreacher had to help me to bed afterward... there we were, swigging firewhiskey like a trio of Irish sailors, and Harry gets this look on his face like he’s just been hit in the head with a Bludger.”

“I think I’ve seen that look on your face a time or two, Ron,” Hermione grinned at him.

Harry leaned back, grinning. It had not been at all funny at the time, and Harry suspected that if they actually viewed the memory in the Pensieve, the others would not find it at all amusing. Indeed, Dumbledore was not laughing (though his eyes twinkled). Snape was not either... but, well, that was Snape, and Harry did not expect to ever see Snape laugh. But Harry was able to lay aside the tragedy to find the humor.

“Harry always has the best ideas when he’s drunk,” Ron said fondly. The twins, Sirius, Remus, and Tonks were still laughing loudly.

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “Your idea about giving Umbridge that love potion...”

“I can’t believe,” Tonks gasped, “that you thought up this mad scheme when you were drunk!”

“We went to Hogwarts to talk to Dumbledore’s portrait right after we recovered from the hangover,” Ginny said, smiling broadly. She winked at her mother, who seemed torn between humor and disapproval. Judging by the way Mrs. Weasley’s lips twitched, humor appeared to be winning.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "If we could get back to the matter at hand..." he said delicately. "Does anyone have any thoughts that are the most likely? I believe we can rule out the Waking Death, Time-Turner, and Tears of Merlin."

"So... what was the Temper Lumans one?" Ron asked.

"Tempus Luminas," Hermione said. She flipped a few pages. "I would like to think it's this one, but that's pretty unlikely... if Luna met him before Christmas during the Potter's Army meetings, and then there was about a week or so in between that and Mr. Weasley being attacked..."

"They could've come back multiple times, couldn't they?" Sirius asked.

"There are illustrations of what kind of toll it takes on the body," Hermione said. She held up the book so they could see. Harry recoiled at the image of the emaciated, skeletal figure. "And that's after one trip to the past."

"Right," Ron said. "Then it's pretty obvious that it's the Trojan Horse, isn't it?"

"But why would a dark wizard help us, Ron?" Mrs. Weasley asked. She looked troubled and confused. Harry met her eyes, but quickly looked away. He had been trying very hard over the past month to follow Sirius' and Snape's advice. He could even look at them in the eye without feeling a great rush of grief and anger... but not for very long.

"It's not necessarily dark," Ron said. "Hell, if it meant defeating Voldemort, I'd volunteer to be bled. It didn't sound like the victim would *have* to die."

"It is also interesting that it can be done multiple times, and it does seem the most likely choice" Dumbledore said. "Though I would not discount Foci Memoria."

"Will you explain what it actually is?" Mr. Weasley said. "I'm afraid that I didn't get a good grasp on it."

"It is far less plausible than the Trojan Horse," Dumbledore said. "For one – I know the laws of the Pensieve, and it would be extraordinarily difficult to change without destroying the fragile web of a memory – I imagine that the backlash of that would severely injure or kill any wizard who made the wrong step. For two – the changes made would have to be subtle; far more subtle than what could be done with the Trojan Horse. Theoretically, the one who uses the Trojan Horse to travel time would have as much chance to change the past and future as Harry, Ginny, and Ron have done. But Foci Memoria, I believe, is best described as changing the present, using future knowledge."

"Huh?" Harry said.

"I think," Hermione said uncertainly. "I think it means that... if Foci Memoria is being used... Merlin isn't changing our futures. He's changing our present in order to change the future."

"Which means," Ron said loudly, "that Merlin's using the damn Trojan Horse method. Merlin knows that"—his eyes widened and he stopped suddenly—"wow, that phrase just takes on a whole new meaning, doesn't it? It was difficult enough figuring out how to use the Tears of Merlin without effing everything up... no way could we do the Pensieve thing."

"Dumbledore could," Harry reminded him. "Snape could... maybe even Percy could."

"But why would I hex myself?" Percy said.

"Maybe to get us thinking about what's going on," Sirius enthused. Harry narrowed his eyes at him. He seemed to find this a little too funny...

"I think," Snape said. "That it is only the remotest of possibilities that the Foci Memoria would work. As the only two of us capable of this kind of subtlety were likely Obliviated by *Merlin*"—he grimaced as though it pained him to say it—"I would bet any number of galleons that it is the Trojan Horse."

“Is anyone else having a hard time understanding every other word since Luna said it was Merlin?” Bill asked. “Does anyone else’s head feel like it just got hit with a Bludgeoning Curse?”

“Mine,” Harry said weakly. There was a chorus of echoes around the table. Even Dumbledore looked slightly overwhelmed. “You know what, though? If anyone is Merlin... it’s either Sirius or the twins. I really believe that. I have a feeling that he’s laughing at us—“

“Oh, he is,” Luna said brightly. “I remember that. I don’t think he’s being unkind about it, though...”

“See?” Harry muttered. He looked over at Ron. “Remember how you used to think that Dumbledore deliberately made things tough for us? And how you thought he was having a laugh? Well... this time, someone actually *is*.”

“Let’s give him a good pounding once we find out who he is,” Ron said. He suddenly looked thoughtful. “Unless, of course, it’s me...”

Harry put his head in his hands and groaned.

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Author’s Note:

Yes, this is a short chapter. I generally have a minimum of 5000 words for each, but I decided to end the chapter here. Had I known that I would do so, I would have merged this chapter with the other... possibly...

The action will definitely pick up in the next chapter, as Voldemort will be making demands on the Ministry of Magic, and Harry decides to hunt down some Death Eaters. There will also be a suggestion made by Neville...

I meant to have a break, I really did. But I realized that I just needed to get this chapter out, otherwise my head would implode from trying

to think about it. I feel much like Harry and the rest at the moment, which is odd. And I even know who is behind all of this...

If anyone has any questions, please feel free to ask!

Chapter 34 – Diagon Alley

The arrival of the Hogwarts letters came as a complete surprise to Harry and Ron. The dilemma of another time traveler – and attempting to ascertain the person's identity and motives – had consumed them for the two weeks prior to the arrival of the stately owls; the fact that they were no longer considered criminals, were perfectly free to return to Hogwarts, and would, in fact, be heading to school with the other sixth years, had not truly hit them.

"Blimey," Ron said over lunch, two hours after he had ripped open his letter and supply list with an expression of great shock. "Blimey. I can't believe we're going back."

"Ron, would you please stop saying that?" Hermione, who Harry thought had been quite patient, finally snapped. "Please? It's just that you've said it so many times."

"It is a little weird," Harry said. He felt the need to defend his best mate, especially since he knew exactly where Ron was coming from. An entire year had passed at Grimmauld Place. It had been a very long year in many ways. Sometimes Harry felt that he had spent the time playing an especially vicious chess game with Ron. That, however, was not entirely accurate; he'd spent the last year locked in battle with Voldemort. *Has it really only been four months since the Weasleys arrived?* "I mean – we've been in hiding, and the Ministry's been hunting us down... now we go back to Hogwarts?"

Ginny and Hermione exchanged exasperated looks. "Harry," Ginny said. "You've *also* said that many times."

"I can't imagine why the both of you are so shocked," Hermione added. "We've *talked* about going back. We've discussed the ramifications of not taking our OWLs with Albus – er – I suppose I've got to get used to calling him 'Professor Dumbledore' again? – and we've agreed to take them next week. Which is why we've been revising the fifth year spells. Just last night you were having a laugh with Sirius and making plans to set Friday evenings aside for debau—"

“All right, all right,” Ron lifted his hands in a gesture of surrender. “So maybe we shouldn’t be surprised. But... I kept thinking it wasn’t actually going to happen. You know... like when you’re a little kid and you’re really excited for Christmas, but when Christmas Eve finally comes and you’re—“

“Don’t pretend like you don’t still get excited about Christmas, Ron,” Ginny said. “I saw you last year, if you remember.”

The tips of Ron’s ears turned red. “That wasn’t because of presents—“

“*Ron!*” Hermione said, scandalized. “Don’t *tell* them!”

“I wasn’t going to,” Ron said. “But you just did. Or told them enough, anyway.”

Harry snorted. Did they think that he and Ginny didn’t know what they’d been up to over the last year? It certainly didn’t take a Seer to know that Hermione and Ron had advanced a little further than kissing even before Hermione had decided to help Ron through the shock of the appearance of his entire family. He eyed Ron. Ron’s lips twitched. Harry took this to mean that Ron had, in fact, known that they would guess. It was Hermione’s delicate sensibilities that were being protected.

Hermione’s cheeks turned bright red.

Fred and George stumped into the kitchen – Harry felt the muscles in his face jump, but he forced himself to relax – and threw themselves down into empty chairs. Luna and Neville followed them in; all four of them looked extremely grumpy. “What’s the matter – er – everyone?” Harry asked.

All four exchanged glances. “Nothing,” they chorused, as one. Fred swiped an apple, and bit into it. “What are you lot so cheery about?”

“We’re just talking about sex,” Ginny said cheerfully, just to push her brother’s buttons. Fred choked. “*Anapneo*,” she said calmly. A bite of apple flew out of his mouth and splat wetly against the side of George’s face. “Sorry, George...”

Harry watched the twins closely. He had to admit to some surprise that the sleeping arrangements had not been challenged. He knew that Ginny had been prepared to have several things to say if any of her family attempted to enforce rules that no longer applied to them. But four months had passed, and not one of them had mentioned it. It made Harry feel slightly edgy – he had no way of telling if trouble was brewing. And he could hardly ask one of the twins if they had a problem with him sleeping with their sister.

“Ginny,” Hermione whispered, horrified.

“Oh ho!” Fred said, grinning at Ron. “Has our little Ron finally stopped having to wa—“

“Give it a rest, Fred,” said Ginny. Hermione looked as though she wanted to run right out of the room.

“Seriously,” Ron said. “What’s got you lot looking like Auntie Muriel’s on her way to stay with us?”

“We’re tired of not doing anything,” George said moodily. He pulled out a crumpled copy of the *Daily Prophet* and tossed it onto the table. Harry already knew what this was about – he had read this morning’s issue of the wizarding newspaper. Unfortunately, the journalists had been taking jabs at the Weasleys, and this morning’s story was particularly bad. “The stupid *Prophet* thinks we’re a bunch of arses.”

There was an uncomfortable silence. “You know why you’re not declaring support,” Harry pointed out finally. “If Voldemort—“

“We don’t care about You-Know-Who!” Fred said loudly. “Can’t we just – can’t we move in here like Percy?”

“We could leave the shop,” George said, though he sounded forlorn. “We could do what Mad-Eye does, and we could—“

“You don’t have the experience to do what Mad-Eye does,” Ron said.

“We’ve been practicing with you lot every night—“

“No matter how much you practice,” Ginny said. “It’s never going to be the same when it actually happens. You can learn all the spells you want... but when you’re actually there, when you’re actually fighting—”

“And who are you to say that we’re not ready?” Fred said. He glared stonily at the table; Harry found that he could not really blame him. “I know you’re – I know you’ve come back in time and all, but George and I are of age and we think it ought to be our decision.”

“It isn’t,” Harry said.

“It should be,” George said mutinously. “We want to help you. We want to fight Death Eaters, and—”

“Harry,” Neville spoke up suddenly. Harry started; he had nearly forgotten that Neville was there. “Harry, what if they did fight?”

“The Weasleys—”

“They can use Polyjuice Potion,” Neville said stubbornly. Harry could tell from the steady look in Neville’s eyes that he had thought of this before. Harry sat back. This was, unfortunately, a solution that had not really occurred to him. It was, he was certain, very important that the Weasleys remain hidden allies with the rest. More than that, Dumbledore was certain. Mr. Weasley was able to help them sort out the Imperiused from the genuine servants of Voldemort at the Ministry – as Percy was in hiding, he could not do this. Bill and Fleur likewise needed to be above suspicion... when the time came for them to break into Gringott’s, they’d need them. The others... Fred and George, Charlie, and Mrs. Weasley needed to keep the secret safe.

Harry poked at his thoughts. Polyjuice Potion was an extremely effective disguise; there would be no reason, or no time during battle, to use the spell that could detect it. Even if the Death Eaters suspected that Harry’s allies actually wore another face, there was no spell that could actually reveal it, only detect if it was in use. And how often had he used the potion both in this timeline and the last? The risk was minimal...

But what of the benefits? Harry glanced over at the twins and Neville and Luna. They were watching him carefully. Neville looked stubborn; Luna was apparently unfazed... and the twins appeared to be caught in the middle between hope and fear. That's what decided Harry. The twins were funny and enjoyed laughter and jokes at the expense of others... but they knew the line between courage and bravado. Harry suspected that the nightly sessions with Mad-Eye had something to do with this.

"All right," Harry said finally. Ginny and Ron gaped at him. "But you are not to reveal who you are under any circumstances. Except, of course, if you're captured." He frowned at them. "I suppose we can also Transfigure your faces underneath the Polyjuice Potion... would that work, Hermione?"

"I expect so," Hermione said. "The potion could wear off, and the spell could remain... it would be good to have an added layer of protection."

"Is it likely?" Fred asked. The skin around his mouth was white. "Getting captured?"

"It isn't impossible," Hermione answered.

"Though you'll probably get killed before that happens," Ron said.

"Why don't you come with us to Diagon Alley tomorrow?" Harry said. He looked around the table. "We'll use a Muggle disguise for the twins, although... we should ask Moody to get more hair from Death Eaters... we could get them in trouble with Voldemort if they were seen with us, and he'd kill them himself."

Harry was relieved to note that the twins did not appear overly excited, and that is what primarily kept him from changing his mind. The other two reasons for not doing so were Moody and Percy, who would also be accompanying them to Diagon Alley. Not only would they add to their numbers, but Moody was uniquely qualified to curb Fred and George's high spirits.

Still, Harry felt uneasy as he tumbled out of the fireplace at the Leaky Cauldron. Fred and George looked so completely different from one

another that no one would be able to tell they were twins at all, let alone the Weasley twins. And Neville and Luna had taken on their appearance (with the strict promise that they would not use the bathroom) to man Weasleys's Wizard Wheezes. *I'm turning into Mad-Eye*, Harry thought ruefully. Ginny had accused him of being a bit paranoid just that morning.

They all waved a hello to Tom, and headed out to the entrance to the Alley. Ron, grinning, drew his wand and tapped the bricks. "Feels good, doesn't it?"

"Oh, yes," Hermione beamed at him.

"Excuse me?"

Harry turned around to see a small family looking stunned and hesitant. A little girl held the mother's hand – she was young enough that she still found comfort in sucking her thumb. A young boy, who was beaming, looked to be about eleven, and just about to start his first year at Hogwarts.

"Oh, hello!" Hermione said. "Are you wondering how to get into the Alley?"

"I – yes," the father said. "The – er – wizard in there said that we could follow you."

"Not a problem," Ron said, as the bricks rearranged themselves. He looked down at the young boy. "Once you get your wand, have Tom teach you how to let your parents and sister in... it's really easy."

"Thanks!" the boy said enthusiastically. He darted around Ron and entered the alley. "Wow! Mum! Dad! Ellie! It's *amazing*! C'mon, c'mon, *come on*!"

"It's real," the woman breathed. "It's really real – Robert, there really *is* a magical alley right in the middle of London."

"Wanna see! Wanna see!" the small girl yelled. She bounced in her father's arms.

“Good luck,” Hermione said warmly. “You might want to stop at Gringott’s first... you can exchange your money with wizard money – my parents are Muggles, so we always went there straightaway. It’s the big white building – you can’t miss it.”

The little family nodded their thanks, and followed their son with an air of wide-eyed delight. Their enthusiasm for the magical world seemed very out of place; people rushed back and forth, hurrying from store to store. The sense of fear was heavy in the air. Harry looked around; there were no school age children here. Parents were likely too frightened of Voldemort and his Death Eaters to allow them to come. *Probably for the best.*

They moved together loosely, standing far enough apart that they all had room to maneuver and aim, and close enough to shield each other if it was needed. Not that Harry thought it would, but after living with Moody for an entire year, his paranoia had only increased. He glanced over at the twins – they and Percy were slightly clumsier, but they caught on.

“Should we get our books first?” Ron asked.

“Of course,” Hermione said promptly. “It’s the most important thing.”

Flourish and Blotts was slightly crowded with harried looking parents and two shopkeepers. No one was happy, though they stopped and stared at Harry and the others. They did not move or speak, only watched him with confused expressions. Harry ignored them, found the books they needed, and hurried out of the store.

“Apothecary,” he said quietly. He felt a prickling sense of unease, though he tried to tell himself that it had been caused by being goggled at like a creature in a zoo. He met Moody’s eye. “We’ll get our potions supplies, and then we’re leaving.”

No one argued.

The experience in the store that sold potion supplies was similar to that of what had happened at the bookstore. Although, Harry had to admit that the shopkeepers at Flourish and Blotts had not dropped a

large barrel of dragon dung in shock. He wrinkled his nose, and refilled his basic potion ingredients.

How long has it been since I've been here? Harry thought. He tried to remember, and thought it might have been right before he'd started his third year. Three years had completely changed the alley in ways that hurt. Stores had gone out of business... people did not call out to each other in greeting, nor did they stop to look in the windows. It felt ominous, and Harry bounced from foot to foot in his agitation to leave.

"Ugh, I don't think I'll ever get that smell out of my hair," Ginny said, looking revolted, once they stepped out of the Apothecary. It had taken half an hour... far too long.

"—did you see it, Dad?" the same little boy who had entered the alley behind them beamed. "It chose me! That man said that wands choose the wizards – isn't that great? Can we go to that broom store now? Did you see how they *flew*? I can't believe that brooms actually fly! I can't wait to try it!"

Harry stared as the boy and his family strode around the corner into sight. They had just exited the new wand shop, and were walking by the mouth of Knockturn Alley. The shadows around it seemed especially quick.

It seemed to happen in slow motion. A burst of red sparks shot into the air. Harry began to run but he was not quick enough. There was a flash of green light and the little boy toppled over. He was dead.

Blood thundered through Harry's veins, and he sent a Reductor Curse into the shadows. There was a blast of light, and someone screamed. "GET DOWN!" Harry shouted at the parents. He saw movement, there was another bang, and the father fell to the ground with a heavy thud. Harry aimed at where the spell had come from and said "*Incendio!*"

A man's voice yelled in pain, and a billow of smoke appeared. More curses flew past Harry's ear – the others had followed. "Go see if there are any more!" Harry shouted at Mad-Eye and Percy. But he already knew the answer. Screams echoed around the alley... and Harry could see flashes of light coming from other sections out the

corners of his eyes. Percy ran toward Gringott's, and Mad-Eye tore off to the entrance. Ron wavered a moment, grabbed Hermione, and pulled her after Percy.

"Shit," Fred whispered. "Shit, shit, shit, shit."

"Hold it together," Harry ordered.

"Well, if it isn't—"

Harry did not let the witch who had stepped delicately out of the shadows finish. She was followed by four other Death Eaters, and she appeared overly confident. "*Sectumsempra!*" he roared, and she opened up from throat to stomach.

Ginny grabbed the mother and the small girl, who were standing, frozen with horror, and staring at the unmistakably dead bodies of the rest of their family. She had a Shield Charm up between the Death Eaters and the Muggle family in a second. "We need to get you out of here," Ginny whispered. Her voice broke.

The mother's eyes were glassy with shock. "I don't understand. I don't – we were – they were just walking."

"Mudbloods and filth have no place in Diagon Alley," said a Death Eater. He was young, but Harry killed him with another Cutting Curse anyway. The moment he had, he felt an intense burn in his leg, and he fell to the ground unable to breathe through the pain.

He rolled over, jerked his wand up, and sent the Death Eater who had attacked him from behind up into the air. Fred stared at him for a moment, raised his own wand, and sent a Bludgeoning Hex so strong that the man's neck snapped in half. Fred lowered his wand, looking shocked. "Don't fall apart," Harry said.

He tried to scramble to his feet, but fell over, and missed a Killing Curse by an inch. Ginny screamed a word, there was a wet splatter and a body thudded to the ground, and Harry redoubled his efforts. "*Skepey!*" The pain eased up enough for him to stagger to his feet. George dueled a masked Death Eater who appeared to be a woman, and Fred was running down the alley, to help Moody.

“FRED, NO!” Harry shouted. But Fred ignored him and kept going.

The alley was so loud that it hurt Harry’s head. Explosions came from the direction Ron, Hermione, and Percy had run off to, and everywhere, people were screaming. “Are you all right?” Harry asked Ginny.

“I’m fine,” she said. But she gestured helplessly at the ground. The mother and the daughter lay on the ground. They had joined their boys in death. “I couldn’t – you know that Shield Charms—“

“Not now,” Harry said grimly, but he squeezed her hand. He could hear Ron yelling in rage from around the corner, and knew that he had it well in hand. “Let’s go after Mad-Eye.”

Harry limped as quickly as he could. He pressed his wand to his throat and, thanking Merlin that Kingsley was not at the Ministry today, sent his Patronus. “Death Eaters in Diagon Alley!”

Every step was torturous, and Harry was sweating and sick from the pain by the time they reached another twist. The fighting was loud. George made to run around the corner, but Harry grabbed his robes and pulled him back. “A moment,” he said. He sent the Specs Spell around the corner, and felt a moment of disorientation when he saw two scenes simultaneously. “There are three of them. Two on the right, one on the left.”

George pushed away from Harry, and jumped right into the fray. Ginny followed him, and Harry followed her. Ginny already had her wand raised, and had levitated a concrete planter. Without a moment of hesitation, she let it fall on the Death Eater dueling Fred. A jet of purple light arced out of a wand, and Mad-Eye fell over, screaming in pain.

“*Sectumsempra!*” Harry shouted. He missed the Death Eater, but Fred burned him before he could retaliate. Silence fell, stifling and oppressive. Harry’s heartbeat slowly returned to normal, and he hobbled after Ginny to check on Moody.

“He’s alive,” Ginny said. “I can’t tell what kind of curse it was—“

“—I’ll have him sent to St. Mungo’s,” said Kingsley. Harry looked up, relieved.

“Ron, Hermione, and Percy—” he croaked.

“We’re right here,” Ron said. “Auror Shacklebolt, isn’t it? One of the Death Eaters got away...”

“Are the rest dead?” Kingsley asked, looking around. Harry did not want to count how many bodies there were. He could see at least five bodies of regular citizens from right here... and that did not count the little family.

“Yes,” Harry said fiercely. He met Kingsley’s eyes. His leg gave out, and Ron caught him by the elbow to keep him upright.

Harry was barely aware of more Aurors arriving, he was only glad that he would not have to talk to them about what had happened. Kingsley was taking their statements down, and with the Ministry bending over backward to make things up to Harry, he did not think that any of his statements would be challenged.

“You might want to visit St. Mungo’s as well, Mr. Potter,” Kingsley said once they had finished.

Harry glanced around at his friends. Hermione had confessed that one of her own spells had caused the death of an enemy. She was very pale and trembled from head to toe. Harry suspected that she had vomited after she had done it; Harry remembered the first time he had killed a man, and he had thrown up his previous three meals once he’d thought about it. Fred and George were likewise shaken. Percy’s lips trembled, though he tried to hide it.

“No,” Harry said, knowing that his place was with them. “I think I’m going to go home...”

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

The attack on Diagon Alley and the ramifications of what had happened settled over Grimmauld Place and Godric’s Hollow like a palpable chill. Despite it being August, fires were lit in the hearths;

Harry, huddled on a sofa next to Ginny, wondered if this was what it was like to be a Muggle, and not be able to see dementors. He felt like there was one in the house.

Everyone was white and pale with shock. Mrs. Weasley had brought out her knitting, but it was going haphazardly at best. She had not been there, of course, but Mr. Weasley had told her everything once he had come home from work. She looked very small, as if this horrible first real act of war had diminished her somehow. Harry wanted to say something to her, but did not know how to bridge the gap. Nor did he know if he wanted that distance breached.

He turned away from her. The twins were pale beneath their freckles. They'd done well, very well, and Harry was impressed. Disregarding that one foolish stunt that could have had tragic consequences, Harry had been happy to have them fighting beside him. *Not to mention, Harry thought ruefully, that they aren't the only ones to do foolish things during battle.*

Ginny rubbed more healing salve onto his leg, and the burn eased up. She'd been applying it every ten minutes since they had returned to Grimmauld Place, and his thigh was beginning to look less like raw meat and more like an actual leg. Not that he looked down on it very often; it made him queasy.

"It's always like this, then?" George said in a hollow voice. He was looking down at his hands as if he had never seen them before. Harry understood.

"Yes," he said as gently as he could. "Though this... it was bad."

He closed his eyes and saw the two children and their parents. He clenched his fist until his knuckles were white. The more he had time to think about it, the more he ought to have expected something like this to happen. The rules had clearly changed, and Voldemort could not be expected to act in the same way. And it wasn't as if he had been quiet last time... but this attack on Diagon Alley had happened two years sooner, and in a much more spectacular way.

"Lucky Voldemort wasn't there," Ron murmured. Hermione had stopped retching, but had her head in his lap. She had killed –

inadvertently – for the first time today. “If he’d known you’d be there...”

“Yeah,” Harry said. Had Voldemort been there, more bodies would have littered the streets. He felt a surge of rage that punched through the weariness and pain. Those Muggle parents had just been buying school things for their wizard son; the little girl might not have even been a witch. They’d probably not had any idea... none at all... that the magical world was so unbalanced that they would die trying to buy supplies.

“Why didn’t Snape know?” Neville asked. “You don’t think – you don’t think that Voldemort suspects him, do you?”

“No,” Harry said. He would know when Voldemort realized that Snape was not his ally. The fury that would burn across their connection would be great. “I suspect that Snape is busy with Draco, and Voldemort didn’t bother telling him. You heard what they said ‘have a little fun, and then get out.’”

“Why did he do it?” Fred asked. He sounded a little helpless, and Harry knew this feeling well. Had he ever really, truly understood how Voldemort could be so cruel and monstrous?

“To cause fear,” Harry said. “The Aurors are running ragged, trying to put out fires and contain Death Eaters. They know it’s only a matter of time before Azkaban is overwhelmed, and Voldemort’s army is far too large. A direct strike on what’s supposed to be a safe place... how many people just decided to stay inside and wait for this to pass without fighting?”

“Voldemort did it as a show of power,” Ron said in a subdued voice. “Remember when he did it to Hogsmeade, Harry? We took down some of his forces – we only let one get away out of twelve. The world will think that he’s got such a huge army that he can afford to lose a dozen people. But—“

“But Voldemort doesn’t care,” Harry said. “If he wants to make an example, he doesn’t care how many people die. He probably figured that they’d be taken down by Aurors, though, and sent to Azkaban...”

His voice trailed away into silence. The ticking of the grandfather clock was especially loud, and Grimmauld Place felt like the gloomy place it had once been. Harry realized that no matter how much death he had seen, it never got better. It was not something that he could get used to. He could not make jokes (and neither could Ginny or Ron) about innocents dying; they could not laugh it off with their particular brand of dark humor, as they did killing Death Eaters.

Harry knew that he would see the faces of the children and the parents and the others who had been murdered until the day he died. Remembering that that day was swiftly approaching, he set his teeth. *Always and always.*

"We should..." Mrs. Weasley spoke up. Then, more confident, "isn't there something we can do?"

"We're doing everything we can, Mum," Ginny said forcefully. She didn't look at her mother, but continued applying the salve, though not as gently as she did before. Harry squeezed her hand. Ginny was not finding it easy to forgive her parents, though she seemed more casual and at ease in their presence than Ron.

"What d'you expect us to do?" Ron asked harshly. "We can't be everywhere at once."

"I meant – I meant for the Muggleborns," Mrs. Weasley said. Her voice quavered a little. "The – the children. And their parents. Well... shouldn't they have a safe place? For when V-Vol-You-Know-Who comes back?"

Harry gaped at her. It was an idea that immediately caught his full attention. The Muggleborns were the members of the Wizarding community that needed the most protection against Voldemort. As soon as the Ministry was taken, they'd be rounded up and murdered or sent to Azkaban. *Is it because I'm a bloke that I always thought of the battle bits?* Harry thought with consternation. If they found a safe place... but what place could be big enough? Not Hogwarts—

"We'd need a bunch of small safe houses," Harry murmured.

"What?" Ron said blankly. Hermione drew in a sharp breath.

“We can alert the other members of the Order,” Harry said. “We’ll use Secret-Keepers... place a bunch of small houses under the Fidelius Charm, and the Muggleborns will have a safe place – they won’t have to run around hiding all the time.”

“Perfect, Harry!” Hermione said.

“It wasn’t my idea,” Harry tipped his head toward Mrs. Weasley. He smiled at her. “Good one, Mrs. Weasley.”

He stood up, despite the fact that his leg still burned a little, and sent a Patronus message to Dumbledore. “Have idea. Come see us.”

It took Dumbledore an hour before he appeared in a swirl of green flames. By then, Harry and the others had hammered out some of the finer details of the plan. It was actually quite simple, and he had to suppress the pang of guilt that came when he saw Mrs. Weasley’s enthusiasm.

“Hogwarts has records, yes?” Harry finished. “And so does the Ministry, I’m assuming? The Muggleborn Registration Commission had a comprehensive list of suspected Muggleborns... I’m assuming that we can compile our own... to protect, not to track.”

“Arthur has contact with many Muggleborns,” Mrs. Weasley pointed out. “He can—“

“He can’t be seen doing *anything* to jeopardize his standing,” Harry said implacably. This was a problem, as he really was in the best position to help the Muggleborns. But as the inevitable fall of the Ministry grew closer and closer, the need for someone Harry could trust implicitly to keep a close watch on the Ministry grew even deeper. Kingsley and Tonks were Aurors, and would likely not have the level of trust that Mr. Weasley had... Mr. Weasley had never hunted down dark wizards. Tonks was likely going to have to go into hiding anyway, as her father was Muggleborn... “He’ll have to do it subtly. Ask him to make a list of all the Muggleborns he knows... and their families. If he can find out whether or not it would be doable for them to go into hiding for however long it takes... and if their homes are large enough to support another family.”

"I'll have Minerva compile a similar list of Muggleborn students," Dumbledore said. "She and Filius have always been in charge of alerting them since shortly after I became Headmaster, and they are best prepared to handle this."

This sensation of doing something that did not involve killing more Death Eaters (however much the idea appealed to him) did much to ease the fear and grief that had been caused by the battle in Diagon Alley. Harry felt as though he were moving forward with purpose... and not continuing to fight the many-headed snake. *It is fighting, though*, Harry thought, *just in a different way*. He thought of how the Muggleborns had been slaughtered, and felt a wave of relief. *That won't happen again. Not again.*

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley," he said quietly. He looked at her directly in the eye for the very first time, and she abruptly turned away as if she had been slapped.

"I – I didn't really do anything," she said.

Order members trickled in and stayed the evening, each of them delighted by the idea that had formed that day. There were a few setbacks: organizing something this huge that involved thousands of people and required speed (as none of them knew when, exactly, the Ministry would topple over) was a feat that daunted even Dumbledore.

The largest problem was living arrangements.

"But why can't they all just stay in their own houses?" Ron asked.

"Think about how careful we had to be at Grimmauld Place," Harry whispered. Dedalus Diggle and Elphias Doge talked jovially together about the supplies needed to implement the plan. They weren't listening, but Harry had to be careful not to say anything unusual in front of those members of the Order who did not know the full secret. "Remember when they almost caught your dad when he Apparated a little too far away from the door? If Voldemort figures out that they're under the Fidelius Charm, he and his followers are going to be relentless. Maybe not to all of them, but it'd be like living in a glass bowl..."

Ron nodded. "I imagine that getting supplies to them would be difficult as well..."

"Mr. Weasley," Harry said. Mr. Weasley had arrived at half past nine, and seemed both overwhelmed and pleased by the new plan. "Do you still have that friend in the Department of Magical Transportation? Because we'll need someone working in the Office of the Floo Network."

"How did you—" Mr. Weasley began, but stopped himself. The top of his head turned bright red. "Sorry," he murmured. "And I do, actually. My brother's niece works in there... and she's a good sort."

But is she trustworthy? Harry asked himself. Could she be trusted not to give anything away?

"—still don't know where we're going to put them," Hestia Jones and Kingsley Shacklebolt were talking in raised voices, though neither one sounded angry, only intent.

"I've got room for at least four other people," Kingsley said in his deep voice. "And I might manage six if I can magic another room... my lot will only fit one more, though."

"Harry!" Neville said loudly. "I've only just remembered — I'm an idiot — but I own my gran's house, and it's huge! I can probably fit about twenty people in there—"

"—and if I don't know any better," Kingsley grinned, "you can probably magic it to almost twice that."

Harry felt his eyes go round, and Ron gaped at Neville. "You're one of those really old, pureblood families, aren't you?" Ron said.

"I haven't got any money, really," Neville said. "But we've got the house..."

Harry sat back and took it all in. After what had happened — he felt a pang of sadness when he thought of the little family — he had no idea that hours later they would all be imbued with a sense of purpose.

Ginny scooted her chair closer to him and gripped his hand tightly. She smiled at him, and brushed her long hair out of her face.

"How's your leg?" she asked.

Harry had almost forgotten that he had taken a nasty curse today. "It's fine – I'd forgotten about it, actually."

Ginny snorted. "That's my Harry," she said. "So stoic..."

"This was a good idea that your mum had," Harry said quietly.

"We really should have thought of it," Ginny said. She shook her head in wonder. "Honestly, how long have we been planning this?"

"Not long enough, apparently," Harry said dryly. "Maybe it took being a mother to figure it out." He gave her a significant look, and her face immediately stiffened.

"Don't push it, Harry," she said sharply. "I can't just ignore these last few years. And I still think you're being a hypocrite – you can barely stand to be in the same room as them. You can't just expect me to forgive and forget just because you think I should."

"I know," Harry laced her fingers with hers. He was glad that she let him. "I know I'm not exactly living up to what I say. But she's your mother, and—"

"—and nothing changes that," Ginny said. "Still. They broke our hearts, Harry. I will *never* forget the look on your face when they kicked you out of the Burrow. And every time I try to – try to let it go, it just keeps coming back. But I'm trying."

"Good. Just... keep at it, won't you?" Harry said. He had full faith in his belief that both Ginny and Ron would regain their former relationship. He wished he could see it happen, but he had a feeling that it would take years, not months. Her expression shifted, and that hard, blazing look he loved so much settled on her face. He fought the urge to kiss her, and wondered if she knew what he was thinking...

"I know what you're thinking," she said. "Harry... I really wish that you would have a little optimism."

Harry forced himself not to look away. "I'm... trying," he said carefully. But any hope he had of surviving was dwindling away with every day that Hermione did not magically point to some obscure text that outlined a way to survive the Killing Curse when one was a Horcrux.

"I'll have faith for the both of us, then," Ginny said.

Harry was amazed by her calm acceptance of the fact that he had little chance of survival. He would have been frantic if it had been her. It gave him a sick feeling in his stomach to imagine her being in his shoes... of imagining any one of the people in this room being in his shoes. He did not think that he would be able to watch any of those he loved stand in front of Voldemort's wand without making a move to defend. For the first time, Harry realized that he was glad it was him. "How do you do that?" he asked. "I can't imagine what I'd be doing right now—"

"Don't think that I'm sitting by and doing nothing," Ginny said sharply. "Do you realize that every student in the castle has been questioned – under Veritaserum – about the missing cloak? I had Potter's Army do that last year, and believe me, it was tricky... and I'm going to have the twins track down the students who graduated after your third year and question them. I'm not going to sacrifice you, Harry."

Harry gaped at her. He had no idea. It constantly amazed him that Ginny loved him with the same intensity as he loved her... "Ginny, I—"

"Harry... do you remember what I told you?" Ginny said in such a low voice that Harry leaned closer to hear her. Harry was at a loss; he remembered lots of things that Ginny told him, but he couldn't pinpoint exactly which one. "I told you... I told you that if you didn't make it, I'd come back for you. I'm not going to let you die. Not forever. I don't care how many times I have to redo this..."

He leaned his forehead against hers. "I think... I think you might just be the only person who wouldn't get hexed into next week for being Merlin. Do you think it's you?"

"I'm not sure," Ginny said. Her brow was furrowed. "I can very easily see myself making another jump in time if it meant saving you. But..."

"But it doesn't seem like your style," Harry told her. "Yeah, I've thought about it... you wouldn't mess with my head like that, would you?"

"I can't imagine why I would," Ginny replied. She grinned slyly at him. "I'd mess with other things, maybe..."

Harry leaned back in his chair, stretched exaggeratedly, and stifled a huge (fake) yawn. "I'm *knackered*," he said feelingly for the benefit of everyone around them. "I think I'm going to bed..."

He did not think that they had fooled anyone.

Harry got very little sleep over the next few days. September first approached rapidly, and what felt like three thousand things had to be done. He, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione traveled to the Ministry of Magic to take their OWLs four days after they had come up with their plan to help the Muggleborns escape from the rapidly approaching darkness. Even Hermione had found the exams to be somewhat of a waste of time. Whenever they were not sleeping, they worked on their plan.

"What's this about, though?" Harry asked. He had just watched Dumbledore and Kingsley add another room in Kingsley's house. It was spacious, and they had done it without real effort. "Why can't you just add another room? Or ten more?"

"The Department of Magical Property has a thing to say against that," Kingsley said, amused. "I purchased this home without the intent of creating a mansion for myself, though I left myself the option to create another room. We're lucky that Moody got his own house back... he can add five more rooms. I could, conceivably, petition to add another few rooms... but that would take time that we simply don't know we have—"

"—and if everyone did it, it would look suspicious," Harry said. "Damn. It would just be so easy..."

"You have not yet visited Neville's home?" Dumbledore asked.

"You know I'm waiting until it's placed under the Fidelius Charm," Harry checked his watch. "He and Sirius are doing it right now, I think."

"Indeed," Dumbledore nodded. "You will find that with the older families, the homes that have been passed down from generation to generation have a greater potential for being enlarged. It was much cheaper to purchase the permits long ago; it was almost expected for purebloods to have personal castles."

"Like Malfoy Manor," Ron said darkly.

"I hope we've got enough room for all of them," Ginny said. Harry thought of the growing list that Arthur Weasley, Kingsley, and Tonks were compiling, and suddenly the room seemed very small.

"We will," Harry forced out. Optimism, like bitterness, was also a choice.

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Author's Note:

Sorry about the delay! The last chapter almost broke me, actually, and I needed some time to recover. The breakneck pace at which I have been writing this has, I think, shown itself in the last few chapters. I'm not pleased with them, let me tell you. Not to mention that the baby has been causing me mild discomfort lately. But I'm feeling well rested and glad to be back writing!

Oh... and to clear up some confusion: the Gateway is not the veil the original Sirius fell through. The Gateway is passive, and can only really be used to watch the past (though it has far less limitations than a Pensieve). I'm not saying that Sirius isn't Merlin, but that is not the way that he accomplished it (if he did).

And... I love hearing the guesses about who Merlin actually is, so let me know! (And a few people have been under the impression that I don't know who it is... I do, believe me!)

Chapter 35 - Interlude

TOM RIDDLE

21 October, 1996 (*This takes place two months after the last chapter. Several things have happened, and it will be explained*)

Lord Voldemort did not feel angry. He gazed down at the four Death Eaters who had so betrayed him to his enemy, the boy Harry Potter, and was not stirred to anger. It was unfortunate, perhaps, that these four now must die. The incompetent fools that had died in the attack on Diagon Alley were better off dead. Indeed, the survivor had not lived long; Voldemort had given him and his family to Fenrir Greyback.

Unfortunately, these four had been some of the more skilled of his servants. But no matter. It was not difficult to find more wizards willing to do what it took to prevail over Mudblood filth. The woman whimpered, and Greyback kicked her. She fell silent.

"You have betrayed Lord Voldemort," he said coldly.

"NO!" Hamish Wentworth shouted. It was a pity that he was about to die. He was in a key position in the Department of Magical Transportation. "We didn't—"

"Do not lie to the Dark Lord," Voldemort said. He did not bother with penetrating the traitor's mind. He raised his wand. "*Crucio!*" Wentworth screamed and writhed on the floor of the cellar in Malfoy Manor; the other two made harsh grunting sounds... like animals... perhaps they were Mudbloods, and they had lied to him.

"He is lying, my Lord," said Snape. "Even my small skill at Legilimency is enough to detect this."

"I know," Voldemort said curtly. The light that emanated from his wand cast strange shadows on the wall. He followed it with his gaze, remembering how close he had come to killing Severus Snape. But Potter... Potter had been stupid. He had let his anger get the best of him. As a result, Voldemort's best ally out of Azkaban yet lived.

Potter was an inconvenience that pricked at Lord Voldemort's temper constantly. The boy was smarter than Voldemort had thought possible. He had successfully disabled some of his allies – though Crabbe and Goyle had been very stupid, they had been the type of brainless muscle that Voldemort needed at times. He and his little friends had also killed over twenty of Voldemort's Death Eaters. In many ways, Potter was even more of an opponent than Albus Dumbledore... Potter was not afraid to kill...

Hamish Wentworth stopped screaming so suddenly that Voldemort was almost taken aback. He gazed down at the body, idly wondering if the pain had killed the man – no, he was still alive, but his mind and sense had fled. He could tell by the glassiness of the eyes. This was Bellatrix's favorite method to rid herself of traitors and enemies. Harry Potter had fought her in the Department of Mysteries, and she was now in Azkaban.

"The fool, Albus Dumbledore, must die," Voldemort said. "I regret ever giving Draco the task. The Ministry is almost mine, and Dumbledore must be dead before that happens. How is the boy... progressing?"

Snape paused. "He prefers to work alone, my Lord. He wants the reward you give him to be his alone."

Voldemort could understand this, though if the Malfoy boy failed, he would be forced to follow through on his threat and end the Malfoy family. "If it is not done by the middle of January," he said, "kill Dumbledore yourself."

"And Draco?"

"An example will be made of him," Voldemort said. "Bring him back to me once Dumbledore is dead."

"As you will," Snape said immediately.

Once Dumbledore and Harry Potter were dead... the years of exile in Albania spent enduring a painful existence would be worth it. Lord Voldemort would have no opposition, none at all. It galled him to have to practice Occlumency against a sixteen year old boy... but that was

about to end. His Death Eaters in Azkaban would be out within the month, two at most. Then the world would be ready to be created in a more perfect image.

Lord Voldemort pushed away the small doubt that had lingered since he had watched Potter blow up the prophecy before his eyes. The only man who knew the fullness of the prophecy was Dumbledore... and Potter, with his youthful angst and righteous anger, *hated* Albus Dumbledore nearly as much as Voldemort himself. The boy felt so betrayed... so misused...

"Tell me," Voldemort said. He pointed his wand at the unconscious woman. There was a flash of green light, and she was dead. "Is Potter still isolating himself?"

"Indeed," Snape said. "He has his little friends, but he is maintaining his fury at the Wizarding world for daring to believe he was a dark wizard. The Slytherins say that he is particularly vicious to his godfather, Sirius Black."

"He is a fool," Voldemort said. Two more curses, and the four who had betrayed him to Potter were dead. He stared at his wand once the light had faded. He disliked the fact that his wand and Potter's had done something unusual in the graveyard. Not for the first time, he cursed the fact that Yaxley and the Carrows had acted so precipitously and killed Ollivander. The two wandmakers he had questioned had had no idea what could have caused the joining of the two cores.

"I have thought so since his first day at Hogwarts," said Snape. "He is rash, foolish, and has no idea how to use his brain. This can only be to our advantage."

Voldemort turned and swept up the stairs. The prophecy and the wand would not stop him from ridding the world of Harry Potter. He had known for over a year – Dumbledore was a fool for trusting Severus Snape – that he must be the one to kill Potter. In truth, he looked forward to it. He wanted to watch the boy's limp body fall to the ground. He wanted to see the fear, smell the sweat, and hear the begging.

Narcissa Malfoy, pale, blonde, and nowhere near as useful as her sister, scuttled out of his way and fairly ran toward the kitchen. Still. Not all could be as vicious as Bella, and Lucius had chosen a wife with the purest of blood...

"Have the rubbish cleared away from the cellar," Voldemort said. She halted so sharply it was as if she was a puppet, and he pulled her strings with his words.

"Y-yes, my Lord," Narcissa said stiffly. "I will—"

But her words were cut off, and a loud voice echoed in the room.

"WELCOME TO THE FIRST EPISODE OF POTTERWATCH!" The voice boomed. It thundered against Voldemort's ears until it filled his head. *Potterwatch?*

"I told you we weren't calling it that," said Harry Potter. His voice was softer than the other... but not by much. Voldemort found himself rooted on the spot, completely surprised, for the first time in years. "I thought we were going to call it 'Tom Riddle is a Total Arsehole Watch.'"

"TOO LONG! DEAL WITH IT, HARRY, WE VOTED!"

This was followed by a string of curses.

Voldemort looked at Snape, then at Greyback. He ignored Narcissa; she was completely useless. "Find the source of this," he said quietly. *How dare he?* He could not help but glance down at the hand with the missing fingers, and felt a burning rage. "They aren't here – they can't be. They'll have a means of projection. Find it. Destroy it."

"I'm sorry about that," said a female voice. Voldemort presumed it was either the Mudblood Granger or the blood-traitor Weasley. "We here at *Potterwatch* would like to thank you for listening—"

"—even though you haven't got much of a choice," said the first voice. Ronald Weasley. He would die with his friend. "See, we've been quiet for a long time about a lot of things – like Voldemort being back and murdering people – that we're a bit tired of it."

“Not even our families—“ said a different female voice.

“We haven’t got a family, Ginny,” said Weasley.

“We’ve been *silent for so long*,” said the Mudblood peevishly, “that we’ve decided to force you lot to listen to us. Tom Riddle and his Death Eaters are responsible for murdering eleven people in the last week alone. Three Muggle families in Brighton were victims of a supposed gas leak, but were actually killed by Death Eaters.”

Voldemort seethed. *How dare the Mudblood call him by his filthy common name?* He would enjoy giving her to Greyback... perhaps Bella would prime her, and Greyback could finish her.

“Not all of them,” said Harry Potter. “Three – children under the age of nine – were torn apart by Fenrir Greyback. Greyback is not a Death Eater. He is a werewolf, and therefore beneath Riddle. They can’t have any nasty half-breeds or non-humans in the inner circle... I’ve always found it a bit funny that Riddle’s dad was a Muggle.”

“He obviously has father issues, Harry,” said Weasley. “Daddy probably didn’t much like magic. Ah, well. We’ll just add hypocrisy to his list of crimes.”

And they laughed.

“My Lord?” The sallow, ugly face of Greyback stared back at Voldemort from beside the door. Stan Shunpike, Cedrella Bulstrode, and Maxwell Harlow stood with him, and rage broke over him like lava. *They had heard.*

“*Avada Kedavra!*” he shouted. Cedrella Bulstrode toppled to the floor. Maxwell Harlow also fell to his wrath, and Greyback and Shunpike sprinted out of the room, slamming the door behind them. The force of Voldemort’s next curse split the door, and it crashed down onto the bodies. He paced the room. *They dare laugh at me? They dare?*

“—urge you to keep safe,” said the Weasley girl. “There is no way to know how many people are Death Eaters or supporters of Tom Riddle. Do not let yourself be coerced or jinxed into joining. Stay safe.”

“And now, Tom,” said Harry Potter, “I speak directly to you. You are a dead man. I don’t care how long it takes; I don’t care how hellish it gets... the world is going to be rid of you.”

“I’m looking forward to the feast we have to celebrate,” said Weasley.

“Until next time,” said Harry Potter.

It took Voldemort a moment to realize that the broadcast had ended. Nagini slithered in, drawn to his anger and his desire to kill. He glanced at the two dead bodies. “You may eat them, Nagini,” he said. Her presence had reminded him of the fact that Potter had no idea that it would be impossible for Lord Voldemort to be killed. No one knew of the Horcruxes... not Snape, not Bella, not Lucius. And as long as still one Horcrux remained... Lord Voldemort would not die.

No one was stupid enough to risk entering the room that night. Lord Voldemort did not usually kill for revenge. And what he planned did not really constitute revenge, either. The murders of Xenophilius Lovegood and Augusta Longbottom had broken the friendship between Potter and his other little friends. Snape had told him that Potter did not even acknowledge the existence of the other two. It was clear that targeting the Weasley parents would not do... there was no love lost there. The youngest Weasleys would probably thank him for it. But Percy Weasley... he was the likeliest candidate. And even if it did not break the friendship, it would bring the known allies of Harry Potter down to four.

He swept out of the room, and immediately came upon Snape and Rothfuss. “You are to find Percy Weasley and bring him to me. *Right now!*”

“My Lord—”

“Do it,” Voldemort said. “Disillusion yourself if you must, but I want someone competent.” He eyed Rothfuss. He was intelligent, though young. He was barely twenty, and he did not have Snape’s skill. “Go with him, Severus. But make sure he’s the one to do it. You’ve proven yourself to me...”

He did not need to tell either of them that Rothfuss would die if he failed.

Voldemort had a light repast while waiting for his two Death Eaters to return. It would be tricky, but Percy Weasley had been foolish enough to emerge from his hiding place weeks ago and resume his career at the Ministry of Magic. It was a pity, really, that Potter had so few allies that he allowed them to place themselves at such risk just to trace Voldemort's own people in the Ministry...

It came as a pleasant surprise that they returned with an unconscious Weasley little more than an hour after they had left. Rothfuss looked immensely proud of himself; Severus Snape was as inscrutable as always. Of all of his servants, Voldemort often thought, Snape came the closest to Voldemort's own mentality. He was capable of cold precision and had exacting standards. He did not enjoy killing, but knew the necessity of the act. *Perhaps I will give him Hogwarts...*

"*Ennervate*," Voldemort pointed his wand, and Percy Weasley's eyes flew open.

He opened his mouth, but only croaked.

"Percy Weasley," Voldemort said softly. "Ally of Harry Potter, blood-traitor, and murderer of those purebloods who would see the world a better place."

Another croak was the only reply.

"He has cursed himself," said Snape. "As soon as he saw Rothfuss, he took a potion and cursed himself."

"What kind of potion?" Voldemort said sharply.

Snape hesitated. "I am not certain, but I believe it was the Forget-For-Now Potion. As you are no doubt aware, my Lord, the use of this potion against oneself has damaging effects... and Weasley drank enough of a dosage for three men. He has five minutes before his mind is completely gone."

Voldemort felt another flare up of rage. This had obviously been a plan of Harry Potter's... the few allies that he had had most likely been given orders to take this potion and use a curse that would ensure silence until it took full effect. Voldemort had to admit – albeit grudgingly, even inside his own head – that it was a sound plan. Percy Weasley had administered the potion to himself... therefore he could not use a trigger phrase to unlock his own memories, and he was completely without purpose.

Except for one.

Voldemort stared into the brown eyes, and knew that the mind behind it was still lucid. The boy was afraid, and began to struggle futilely against his bonds. He croaked again and again and shook his head back and forth. He grunted and yanked at the black cords that snaked around his body while Voldemort watched.

“Avada Kedavra!”

The light left the brown eyes, and Percy Weasley slumped over. He was dead.

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Author's Note:

For those of you who have read my profile in the last few days, you will know that Backward With Purpose is coming to an end soon. It never was going to last forever, sadly. However! There will be a sequel. I don't imagine that it will be as long as Backward With Purpose, though it will have a significant length. Merlin has, after all, had several adventures (some that you don't even know about). It will be in a different story, so when the time comes, I will definitely give the subscribers of this story a fair warning.

I would also like to say thanks to Jack and Simon who are very good at listening and offering ideas. Oh! And I've also included my Yahoo ID in my profile, so if anyone wants to chat...

And a recommendation (since Furious Angels has been a hit among you guys): Destiny Redefined by thejealousone is one of the best time traveling stories around. It isn't anything like what I've read, and I'm not going to give any spoilers, but it is very twisty-turny and wonderful. So while you're waiting for another update to Backward With Purpose, I think you should give it a try. Don't make me Imperius you into doing it!

This Interlude takes place during and after the events of the next two chapters, which is why I have given the date. Don't be confused!

Chapter 36 – Defence Against Dark Arts

01 September 1996 (*Almost two months before Riddle's Interlude*)

Harry had previously thought that he had gotten used to the stares. But as they fell through the barrier between the Muggle world and the magical world at King's Cross, Harry felt the weight of scrutiny from everyone on the platform. Students and parents alike turned to stare; some openly pointed, and the air buzzed with his own name. He heaved a sigh, and Ginny gripped his hand.

"Let's just get on the train," Harry mumbled.

"Harry," Ron looked around exaggeratedly. "I didn't think it was possible, but I think you're actually even more famous!"

Harry swore at him. They bickered (not entirely good-naturedly) as they loaded their trunks onto the train, and found an empty compartment. With a stroke of luck, Ernie MacMillan was loitering outside of a compartment full of Potter's Army members. His eyes widened when he saw Harry, but Harry gave a sharp shake of his head. *Don't acknowledge me*, he thought. Ernie looked puzzled, but kept his mouth shut.

"Room of Requirement," Harry said. "Tomorrow night."

Ernie nodded, and Harry and the others continued on without looking back.

"They're probably desperate for news," Hermione said quietly. "We haven't had a chance to see them or talk to them since last year."

"And the stupid Daily Prophet—"

"We *know*, Ron," Ginny said impatiently. All of them were extremely short on sleep and apt to snap at each other at a moment's notice. She yawned widely.

Harry raised his wand and pointed it at the door. He whispered a word, and it made a squelching noise... he had sealed it so no one

could enter without giving Harry advance warning. "I'm exhausted," he admitted. He also did not want to risk seeing Draco Malfoy. It had been confirmed the other day that Malfoy had participated in an attack against two Muggleborn students – Harry wondered if it hadn't been some sort of Death Eater initiation. The students were dead...

"Don't attack Malfoy," Ginny warned him. She had apparently been reading his mind. Harry looked down and saw that his fist was clenched tightly around his wand. *That was probably pretty obvious*, Harry thought ruefully. But instead of tracking down Malfoy and throwing him off the train, Harry settled himself against the window, closed his eyes, and fell asleep thinking of vengeance.

He felt groggy and disoriented when they finally got off the train. He barely had time to look around and catch his bearings before he was swept up into a bone-crushing hug. "*Hagrid, no!*" Harry hissed. He wrenched himself away, looking around frantically. *If Malfoy had seen, Voldemort might have another target...*

"I saw him coming and shielded you," Ron said quietly.

Hagrid looked completely bewildered. "What's goin' on?"

"People who like me end up dead," Harry said. "Listen – I can't explain anything here. I'll send – I'll send Luna Lovegood to you tomorrow. Follow her; we've got to explain a few things."

"Bu'—"

"Not here!" Harry said. A group of first years were watching them, young faces lit with avid curiosity. He forced himself to look furious. "Don't tell anyone," he said. "Don't tell anyone."

He strode away without looking back.

This was the only unplanned encounter that evening.

Harry paused just outside the massive doors, steeling himself against the stares he knew were about to follow. The last of the stragglers made their way in, and Harry rolled his eyes, preparing for the dramatic entrance he was about to make, and pushed open the doors

with more force than was strictly necessary. Practically the entire school (except the first years waiting to be Sorted) was watching when the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor deliberately intercepted Harry as he made his way into the Great Hall.

“Harry Potter,” Sirius said. Harry was a little frightened by how good of an actor Sirius appeared to be. If Harry didn’t know any better, he’d be certain that Sirius was, in fact, trying to cozen up to him. “How are you, son?”

“Don’t call me son,” Harry spat. “My father never would have deserted *your* son, but he was twice the man you are...”

“Harry—“

“Get away from me,” Harry practically yelled it, wanting the entire school to see this. “You *betrayed* me!”

“I know I was wrong”—Sirius’ eyes twinkled. *Don’t start laughing, Sirius!*—“but you have to admit that it looked pretty damning.”

“That’s funny, coming from you,” Harry sneered. The crowd stirred. “Weren’t you the one sent to Azkaban without a trial? You filthy hypocrite.”

“Mr. Potter,” Dumbledore said loudly. His voice boomed down from the Head Table.

“And don’t even get me started on you,” Harry said. He was startled by the fact that he was actually enjoying himself. He had to admit – if only to himself – that he took great satisfaction in messing around a thousand people. “I’ve spent this entire summer thinking about this and—“

“You don’t have to do it alone now,” Sirius said. His lips were twitching, and Harry was glad that the other students were too far away to see.

“We’ve been doing just fine without you,” Ron said. “Managed to survive Voldemort”—a great wind rushed through the hall as the

students collectively gasped—“and the bastards at the Ministry just fine for an entire year, didn’t we?”

Harry made a show of looking around the school. “Trying to relive the glory days, Sirius? You—“

“That is quite enough, Mr. Potter!” Professor McGonagall pushed through the sea of students who had unconsciously gathered around, watching the showdown. “Whatever personal issues you might have with *Professor* Black will not be addressed before the entire school.”

“Professor Arsehole, you mean,” Harry said. There was a smattering of laughter; Dean and Seamus grinned appreciatively.

“Ten points from Gryffindor,” she said promptly. “And detention with me tomorrow night at eight. My office.”

Relieved that she had swallowed the bait so swiftly, Harry nodded swiftly. He made sure to roughly push by Sirius on his way to the Gryffindor table. He imagined that McGonagall’s lips thinned even further, but she did not choose to say anything. He glanced over to the Hufflepuff table; Ernie stared at him, brow furrowed. Harry gave him a small grin, and shook his head.

“*Well*,” Dumbledore said. “Now *that* drama is out of the way, before we eat, there are a few start of term announcements...”

Harry spent the next twenty four hours trying to appear surly, stand-offish, and put-upon. The members of Potter’s Army who knew him well grew increasingly baffled. He had to admit that he’d gone a little overboard, but once the entire school figured out that he was filled with indignation at the fact that everyone had turned their backs on him, he figured he could ease up a little.

“Harry,” Colin Creevey said at breakfast. “Would you like—“

“Don’t talk to me,” Harry said in a loud voice that would carry over to the Slytherin table. “You didn’t seem so keen to talk to me last year.”

“Yeah,” Ron said belligerently. “Shove off, Creevey.”

Harry seized his schedule from Professor McGonagall's hand, and glanced down at it. He had been cleared to take Potions, Transfiguration, Ancient Runes ("Thanks, Hermione," Harry said – he would not have passed that particular OWL without her intensive study methods.), Defense Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, and Charms. "Why are we continuing with Ancient Runes again?"

"I dunno, mate," Ron said. "Because the girls are making us?"

"Your girl," Harry retorted. "Ginny wouldn't make us do this."

"Do you think they know we're sitting right here?" Ginny asked Hermione in a loud whisper.

Harry was relatively quiet in Ancient Runes, though he had a slight headache by the end of it. He wondered how Hermione had ever thought that he'd be able to pass the NEWTs in this subject. He stared glumly at his text, and thought he might ask McGonagall if he could withdraw from it.

None of the professors said much at all to Harry – he supposed that his sullen and angry demeanor put them off. He was careful to only say rude things to the members of Potter's Army that he had classes with (though he ignored Daphne Greengrass completely)... with one exception.

It happened that Harry and Ginny, and Ron and Hermione met Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle as they left the Great Hall just after dinner. Harry felt a twist of disgust as he watched Malfoy strut as if he owned the castle. His robes covered his left arm, but Harry knew that the Dark Mark was there. He drew his wand.

Draco smirked, obviously under the impression that Harry would not dare do anything under the watchful eyes of so many people. "How'd you enjoy your exile, Potter?"

Harry pretended to think. "Almost as much as I enjoyed sending your dad to Azkaban, Malfoy. Though I think," he tipped his head at Crabbe and Goyle, "that I enjoyed the fact that Voldemort keeps offering his own followers for me... makes my job a lot easier..."

“Go away, you foul git,” Ron said. “Scamper off...”

Malfoy looked as though he wanted to say something further. Harry wanted him to say something further. *Give me an excuse, Malfoy*, Harry said. *Just one little excuse...* But Malfoy did not want to play; he backed away toward the door. Crabbe and Goyle – who were, apparently, too thick to realize that Harry had just told them he was glad their dads were dead – followed him.

Ginny entwined her fingers with his. “Want to go to the Room of Requirement?” she whispered. She was not quiet enough.

“That’s what we were going to do,” said Ron.

“I said it first,” Ginny said smugly.

“I already convinced Hermione,” Ron hissed. “Don’t even *try*—”

Harry and Hermione rolled their eyes, and Harry decided that Hermione’s need to be in a completely secure environment while she and Ron had sex was greater than his own. He tugged on Ginny’s hand, and pulled her to the doors that led outside. “I’m feeling a little adventurous,” Harry breathed into her ear. “Let’s go explore those secluded areas.”

He and Ginny parted company ten minutes before his detention with Professor McGonagall. With a promise that he would see her as quickly as possible, he turned down the corridor that led to his Head’s office, and she made her way up the stairs to the Room of Requirement. He watched as Dean, Neville, and Seamus followed her at some distance, then he turned and walked away.

Professor Dumbledore was already there, though Harry could tell immediately that McGonagall was still in the dark about what was going on. Her eyes flashed at him. “Sit down, Potter,” she said in a clipped voice.

Harry sat, surreptitiously glancing at his watch. They wanted to stage the arrivals of the other professors, so that it happened at the same time. Sirius had said that he’d get Sprout and Flitwick there at eight-

fifteen, and Luna knew when to bring Hagrid. He sighed. He would have to endure five minutes of lecture.

“Mr. Potter, I realize that you have endured a great trial in the last year,” Professor McGonagall said. Her voice had softened somewhat. “But rudeness to a professor – or to the headmaster – cannot and will not be tolerated.”

Harry squirmed, and cut a glare at Dumbledore. He appeared to be enjoying himself. “I’ll – er – try to tone it down, Professor.”

“Do so,” she said. Then, after a moment of hesitation, “Potter, I am glad that you have been... exonerated, but I have to wonder where you’ve been all this time? Why didn’t you try to explain to the Ministry?”

“Professor, tell me, did you like Dolores Umbridge?” Harry asked. “Did you think she was a good person? The Ministry is full of people like her... and the rest of them are Voldemort’s. Precious few of them would’ve listened to me.”

He stood up. “I—“

“Your detention is not yet finished, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall said.

“Actually,” Dumbledore said, “we’re just going to move it.”

“I don’t understand, Albus,” McGonagall said. Harry opened the door and peered around it.

“You will, Minerva,” said Dumbledore. “But for the moment, pretend that you do.”

McGonagall looked extremely suspicious, but she did not say a word as the three of them walked out of her office and headed up to the seventh floor corridor. Harry saw the hem of Professor Sprout’s robes before it vanished inside, and he held out his hand to stop the door from closing, while Dumbledore ensured that the corridor was completely empty.

“Hey, guys,” Harry said. An overwhelming racket greeted him.

“Harry, what the hell—“

“—since when do you hate Sirius?”

“Where are we? I’ve never seen this place before!” Professor Flitwick squeaked.

“I’m so confused—“

“What was up with you saying—“

Harry held up his hand. “Sorry, everyone. I know I’ve been an arse all day, but I’ve got a good reason.” He turned to Professor McGonagall. “You just asked me where I stayed last year?” He pointed at Sirius. “I stayed with my godfather.”

Her eyebrows slammed together. “But you were—“

“My godson,” Sirius said proudly, “is playing the world’s greatest prank on Voldemort.”

Flitwick squeaked.

“What?” Hagrid said. “Bu’—“

“Voldemort,” Harry said. “Voldemort is pretty convinced that I’m alone – except for Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Moody, and Percy Weasley. We’re going to let him keep thinking that, because if he gets overconfident he’ll be careless.”

“And we need him as careless as we can get him,” Ron said.

“I don’t understand,” McGonagall looked around the room. “Miss Lovegood... Mr. Longbottom – I thought you severed all ties with Mr. Potter and the others—“

“Of course not,” Neville said loudly. “We knew who killed my gran and her dad. We never thought it was Harry. We’ve been pretending for all the Slyth”—Daphne smacked him in the stomach—“er, sorry, Daphne. There are children of Death Eaters here, and we couldn’t risk them telling their parents what was going on.”

“Like I said,” Sirius said. “World’s biggest prank.”

“I told Dumbledore what had happened the night Voldemort returned as soon as I was able,” Harry said. “And we’ve working to defeat him ever since.”

“And we’ve been training with Dumbledore and Sirius – er, Professor Black – and Remus since last fall,” Ernie McMillan said. “We’re Potter’s Army.”

“How come I wasn’ asked ter join Potter’s Army?” Hagrid asked, injured.

“It wasn’t safe,” Neville said. “We only took people who doubted what the Ministry was saying, especially since Harry here came to Hogwarts three times a week.”

“Not that we didn’t trust you, Hagrid,” Harry hastened to add. “We just thought it was a little risky.”

Harry fielded questions from the bewildered teachers for the next twenty minutes. He was relieved when none of them questioned the lie they had told. When he had satisfied them enough with answers, he asked, “would you like to see what we learned last year?”

“They’re quite good at Defense Against the Dark Arts,” Sirius said proudly. “They’re going to show up all their classmates, that’s for damn sure.”

“I’m tired of all this waiting,” Ron said quietly, while the members of Potter’s Army lined up to face each other and duel. The teachers, who still looked rather dumbstruck and confused, gaped at the abilities of the students. It was one thing to know on an intellectual level that they had had private instruction with Harry, Ginny, Ron, Dumbledore, Sirius, and Remus three times a week over the last year, but it was quite another to see it in action. Harry felt like he was watching through their eyes, and found that he was amazed.

“What?” Harry said. “Oh... waiting. Yeah.”

"You're a lot more patient than you used to be, Harry," Ron said. "Maybe you *would* have done well in Slytherin."

Harry shrugged. "I think we both would've, if Slytherin weren't full of baby Death Eaters like Malfoy. But we probably would've killed them long ago."

Ron laughed. "True."

"And I'm being patient because I have to be," Harry said. He was still furious about what had happened in Diagon Alley; it seemed to have settled into his bones. But he could wait until the time was right. Snape would know... they would hear about the next major strike, and they would be waiting for it when it happened. "I haven't given up on killing Death Eaters, Ron. I keep seeing that little boy and his family, and sometimes I think that I could do it without a wand."

"You've learned some pretty scary control," Ron said. "I hate to think of what would happen if you lost it."

"I hate to think about what might cause it," Harry replied. He looked over at Ginny, who helped Hannah Abbott with the complicated wand movement required to perfect the Malady Curse. If anything happened to Ginny... he did not know what he would do. Or if anything happened to Ron, Hermione, Neville, or Luna. Sirius. Remus. Percy. Even the other Weasleys. Dumbledore and Snape. Harry had already lost all of them once, and he honestly did not know how he would react to any one of them dying again.

Harry's greatest flaw as someone who was leading others into war was the fact that he would rather take on every enemy alone. He did not want anyone to be hurt... he did not want to be responsible for people dying. Even after all these years, the thought of Ginny battling against Death Eaters and risking death filled him with a cold sense of dread. He tried not to let her see this, but he suspected she knew. Sometimes he thought that she knew him better than he knew himself.

Her long hair danced behind her, like tongues of flame. He did not think she was Merlin. Oh, he knew she was capable of doing something extremely risky – how could he not be? But his instincts

told him that this was not her style. And he was beginning to suspect... he was beginning to suspect that he was Merlin.

The suspicion had been sparked by his conversation with Ginny in which she admitted that she thought she was Merlin. It would make sense if it was Harry. His future self would not want to risk a time paradox, which could be why he had been disguised so heavily in the Department of Mysteries. It explained how he had known exactly what to do when the dementors had come...

But how far into the future was he (if it was Harry) coming from? It was before his final confrontation with Voldemort... dead men could not travel back in time, after all. And he knew, without even having to think about it, that he would not be able to stand before Voldemort's curse if Ginny was dead. He would wait... he would travel back to save her—

"Harry?" Ron said. "You're looking a bit funny, mate."

Harry shook his head forcefully. "I'm all right."

HPHPHPHPHPHP

17 October 1996

Hamish Wentworth was a deeply unpleasant man, and Harry could not help but feel slightly glad that he was going to die at the hands of Lord Voldemort. The man was tall, had the nose of an eagle, and worked in the Department of Mysteries, studying death. Over the last six months, the wizard had taken a less passive role in his researches, and the deaths of three Muggles had been directly attributed to him.

The others were equally culpable, and grim satisfaction washed over Harry. He had been itching to retaliate against the Death Eaters since he had watched the small family in Diagon Alley die. The month that had elapsed since then had gone by with the speed of a glacier, despite the fact that preparing sanctuaries all across Britain was a logistical nightmare. But he was only involved in the periphery of it – Albus and Mrs. Weasley were truly in charge of the project.

Harry grinned over at Ron. "It feels good to be doing something, doesn't it?"

"Oh yes," Ron said fervently. He kicked out, and Uther Gamp whimpered. "That didn't even hurt," Ron said, disgusted. "Not like the Cruciatus, anyway."

"Can we stop taunting them now?" Snape said in a bored voice. Not that he looked like Snape; he was currently disguised as a blond young man with wide brown eyes and a paunchy middle. It was a bit disconcerting to hear Snape's sardonic tone coming from a gormless college student's mouth.

Harry shrugged, checking his watch. "We've still got half an hour."

"And it's a great way to release tension," Ron said.

"Don't you have a girlfriend for that?" asked Snape, curling his lip.

Hermione made a strangled sound. Bill and Charlie laughed loudly. "Just... just shut up."

The cottage in which they kept the prisoners that Moody had procured for them was alive with the familiar symphony of terror, purpose, and elation. It was also a full operation. Every member of the Order of the Phoenix over the age of seventeen (and some under) from Albus Dumbledore to Molly Weasley to Mundungus Fletcher was there. Most would fight, though Mrs. Weasley and Elphias Doge were to stay behind to make sure that the prisoners did not escape until Harry was ready to send them back to Voldemort.

Hermione stood in front of Bill, Charlie, Fred, and George, her brow furrowed with concentration; her anger with them for embarrassing her had obviously fled. Bill's nose lengthened, his eyes became wide-set and faded to a murky, grey-brown. Harry watched, interested, as Bill became the image of Hamish Wentworth. Hermione was an artist with transfiguration... but she was taking too long.

"Allow me, Hermione?" Dumbledore murmured. "Excellent job, but for the sake of time..."

By the time Hermione had completed Bill and Fred, Charlie and George had also been transformed. Snape handed them a small dosage of Polyjuice Potion – the first part of the plan involved them appearing like Muggles from the village – and the four Weasleys transformed again.

“Remember the plan,” Harry said. He glanced at his watch again. Ten minutes... they had to leave now. One by one, the others began to disappear as they placed themselves under the Disillusionment Charm. Harry tapped himself on the head, and watched his body blend in with the surroundings. His palms were sweaty, and he wiped them off on his robes before he snatched up Ginny’s hand, turned on the spot, and found himself on the hill overlooking the village that was to be attacked.

It was broad daylight. Cars drove slowly down the narrow streets; it was Sunday, and few people were out and about. The air around Harry stirred as Sturgis Podmore, Emmeline Vance, Dedalus Diggle, and Hestia Jones immediately strode toward the village. Harry could see the shimmer of the charms of protection they cast. It was not perfect... Harry knew that it was unlikely that everyone would survive. But he would make certain that the casualties would be minimal.

The ground trembled beneath his feet. *Giants*. He had known it, but when he saw what appeared to be buildings lumbering forward from the opposite side of the village, his heart skipped. The Death Eaters who flew on brooms beside the giants looked tiny.

“Let’s go,” Harry said.

Ginny marched beside him. He couldn’t see her, but he could feel her hand in his, and he could smell that fresh, flowery scent. He worried that today would be the day that set the events in motion that caused him to go back in time to save her. *What if today is the day that she dies and I become Merlin?* Harry thought morbidly. He wanted to ask her to leave, to go help her mother watch over the prisoners. But he couldn’t ask her to do that when she cared just as much as he did. It wouldn’t be right of him to lock her away.

“I see thirteen Death Eaters,” Ron said.

"I see two giants," Ginny said grimly.

Harry stood on the road heading into the village, waiting for the signal. He gripped his Firebolt tightly. The ground trembled in earnest, and a young man actually stopped his car and got out. "Earthquake!" he shouted to no one.

"*Imperio!*" Ron pointed his wand at him, and the man immediately began to walk away from the village. "I sent him to hide," Ron explained.

Harry nodded. He was about to check his watch again when red sparks shot into the air at the same moment the Anti-Apparition wards went up. "Leave one alive," Harry reminded them.

Harry released the Disillusionment Charm, mounted his broom, and shot up into the sky. Ginny and Ron came up on either side of him, while Fred and George flew underneath, racing each other to the Death Eaters who had not yet noticed them. Charlie swerved around in an arc, aiming for their backs.

Two figures hurtled off their brooms and fell screaming before the Death Eaters realized they had company. "*Incendio!*" Harry shouted, and another Death Eater fell in a swirl of flames. Their advantage was swiftly lost as the Death Eaters regrouped.

"IT'S POTTER!" one of them shouted. "ALERT THE DARK LORD!"

Harry watched, swerving and diving around curses, while Stan Shunpike pressed his Dark Mark. He felt a mild pang of surprise -- Stan really *was* a Death Eater -- but it was lost in his satisfaction that Dumbledore had prevented them from using their marks to call Voldemort to this battle.

Four Death Eaters broke away from the others, as Harry had known they would. He ignored them -- the others were protecting the Muggles, and Bill and Hermione were perfectly capable -- and focused his attention on the remaining six. "*Sectumsempra!*" he shouted. There was a spray of blood that glinted in the sunlight, and the woman fell from her broom with a gargling rattle.

Ginny's hex lifted a heavy man from his broom, and sent him flying backward. He landed on the roof of a home, and was splayed. His limbs were bent at unnatural angles... Harry watched him twitch, but wasn't too worried. A man with his neck almost twisted off wouldn't be much use even with a wand.

At that moment, the Polyjuice Potion faded away. Fred laughed at Stan's shout. "UTHER!"

"It's me," Fred said.

"You – you're—"

Harry tore away through the air before Stan stopped sputtering with shock. The Muggles had noticed that their village was now the site of what must be terrifying and confusing. The giants wreaked havoc through the town. The screams from the ground sounded eerie in Harry's ears.

"Uther!" Harry yelled. "Banson! To me!"

Fred and George followed; they left Stan bound to the top of the church spire. The other giant was now on the opposite side of the village. Harry saw Charlie sending curses after curses at it, though they bounced off the giant's thick skin. "Try it your way!" Harry bellowed. The twins laughed.

George pulled a firework out of his robes, and slowed down so that he kept pace with the giant. "BANSON, LOOK OUT!" Fred shouted, and George narrowly missed decapitation by severed billboard.

Harry cast a Bludgeoning Curse directly at the giant's temple. It barely fazed him, but it turned toward Harry, mouth gaping open—

And George tossed the lit firework inside it.

"*Incendio!*" Fred shouted.

Harry dodged as smelly chunks of brain and bone rained down on him, pelting his body with bits of giant. "WATCH OUT!" he shouted, for the benefit of whoever might be underneath the feet of the

toppling giant. It swayed for on its legs, the body not yet aware that the head had just exploded.

“THAT – WAS – AWESOME!” Fred shouted, as the giant crashed through a storefront, blood still leaking out of the jagged wound of its neck.

“IT’S WORTH THE EAU DE GIANT SMELL!” George yelled back. They pushed their brooms and raced to Charlie and his giant.

Harry laughed, and then spotted a black-cloaked figure raising its wand at the gas main of a home. He looked around... sure enough, three other homes were burning. The wards and charms that the other members of the Order of the Phoenix had cast would not help against this. *I wonder where the Death Eater learned this trick... a Muggle grandparent?*

Before he could kill the bastard, Hermione sprinted out from between two houses, and slashed him from throat to sternum. “Nice aim, Hermione!” he yelled, as he flew above her. The sirens were wailing louder and louder; he was not sure that she had heard him.

He came upon Bill the next street over. He was dueling with another Death Eater – the last one left, besides Stan – and smashed him with a concrete planter before Harry could try to help. Harry landed and hit the ground running. “Fly by the church spire,” he said. “The Death Eater is up there.”

Harry glanced at his watch. *Has it really only been fifteen minutes?* He Disillusioned himself, and hurried to the rendezvous point. When had he last seen Ginny? She’d killed the Death Eater... He broke into a quick trot, willing her to be there before he was, if only to reassure himself.

The grass was flattened, and he knew that several people were already waiting. “Ginny?”

“Harry!” she said.

“Did you see the giant?” Ron asked. “I’m going to watch that memory over and over again in the Pensieve...”

"I was there," Harry told him.

"It was ingenious," Dumbledore said.

"Our fireworks are very strong," Fred said modestly.

"Only the best for giant-slaying," George said robustly.

Harry laughed, but stopped immediately when hasty footsteps – several more people were arriving – reached them.

"Podmore and Vance are dead," Moody interrupted bluntly. "Saw it happen myself. The Death Eater that was blowing up the houses got them too."

The bottom dropped out of Harry's stomach, and Ginny gripped his elbow tightly. "Oh no," she said. Harry could not make himself speak. He did not want to admit, even to himself, that he had not expected casualties. Giants – despite Fred and George's methods – were tricky and extremely difficult to kill. They did not need magic or weapons to fight, though the damage they had done with their clubs was severe; they only needed to step on a fragile human body to end a life.

"Does anyone know how many Muggles?" Ron asked in a hoarse voice.

"I would say twenty or more," Kingsley said. "The Death Eater that caused the houses to explode... he did a lot of damage. Has anyone seen Hermione? She was running after him—"

"He's dead," Hermione said in a low voice. "I killed him."

Someone – Bill, Harry presumed – landed with a thud. "I regret to inform you that Stan Shunpike has escaped. Is everyone accounted for?"

"Everyone but Sturgis and Emmeline," Charlie said.

"What—"

“We have to go,” Tonks said urgently. “The Ministry will be here any minute.”

Harry turned on the spot, and Apparated back to the small cottage that currently housed their prisoners. Mrs. Weasley screamed as soon as they appeared and Disillusioned themselves. *I can't imagine that we look – or smell – very decent*, Harry thought grimly. Now that the battle fury had started to wear off, he felt sick at the smell.

“*Scourgify!*” Ginny said, and some of the worst of the mess vanished, though Harry knew that he would never wear these robes again. He wiped at a smear of grey matter on his front.

“Fuck the Ministry,” Ron said loudly. Even Harry was startled; this had apparently come out of nowhere. “We’re fighting – and dying,” he said angrily. “And it’ll be Diagon Alley all over again in the *Daily Prophet*. ‘There was a slight altercation, but never fear, the Ministry was able to minimize damage...’”

“It almost makes me wish the Minister was a Death Eater,” Mr. Weasley said. He had burned his hand, and Mrs. Weasley was wrapping it for him. “Then we’d have a legitimate reason to go after him.”

“Changing your tune a bit, aren’t you, Dad?” Ron asked. “I seem to remember you being pretty concerned when I said something similar to Harry about Lockhart.”

Harry felt slightly sick at the look on Mr. Weasley’s face before he turned away. But how could he say anything to Ron? That would make him the worst sort of hypocrite. He cast around for a change of topic once the silence had swelled to an almost painful intensity. Ron stared at his father, as if wanting a confrontation. But Mr. Weasley sat with his head bowed, and did not say a word.

“Ron,” Harry said. “What if we gave the public the truth? What if we gave them something like”—he lowered his voice, aware of the presence of those Order members who did not know the full truth—“Potterwatch?”

Chapter 37 – Out Of Control

WARNING: *This chapter deserves an M-rating for violence, I think.*

“We aren’t going to *call* it that,” Harry said for the fourth time. “We can call it something like... something like ‘Tom Riddle is a Total Arsehole’ Watch.”

He did not like the way everyone in Sirius’ office rolled their eyes. Even Professor McGonagall did. “I’m serious,” he insisted. Instead of agreeing with him, Sirius patted him on the shoulder and thrust a glass of firewhiskey in his hand. It was the Friday night after the battle in the Muggle village, and they were preparing to broadcast the very first real bit of news to the public.

“Thank you for the great idea, Professor Flitwick,” Ginny said admiringly. “It was perfect.”

“Yeah,” Ron said. “We weren’t sure how we were going to manage to take over the WWN. This is even better.”

“Anything to help,” Flitwick squeaked.

Harry agreed with Ron and Ginny in that Professor Flitwick was a genius. Even Dumbledore had not thought of charming innocuous looking items outside Wizarding establishments to broadcast what Harry liked to call (though no one else did) Riddlewatch. Everyone in St. Mungo’s, the Leaky Cauldron and the rest of Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, Hogwarts, and the Ministry of Magic would be able to hear what Harry had to say.

Not to mention that if the Ministry (or Voldemort) wished to silence the broadcast, they would have a damn hard time of it. Dumbledore had hidden the items himself. Harry was particularly pleased about the one they had planted near Malfoy Manor.

“He’s going to be so angry,” Ron said blissfully. “I can just see him stomping up and down, throwing a tantrum like a three year old.”

“I don’t think you should drink anymore, Ron,” Hermione said. “You don’t want to be drunk for this.”

“Yeah, I do!” Ron said, grinning. “It’ll be even better—“

“You’ll deviate from the script!” Hermione said.

“That’s likely,” Harry said. “But he was just as likely too even without the alcohol.”

“You don’t worry your head about it,” Ron told her. “Just keep drinking your mead, and everything will be fine.”

She huffed, but looked amused despite herself.

Harry was feeling pleasantly warm and comfortable by the time they were about to begin the first broadcast. “Remember the last time we got this tipsy?” he grinned at Ginny.

“You mean when we were planning out how to kill Umbridge and my parents walked in?” Ginny smiled ruefully. She said it quietly enough that those who did not know the secret behind Dolores Umbridge’s mysterious disappearance (Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick) could not overhear. As far as Harry was concerned, what had happened in Umbridge’s office would stay in Umbridge’s office.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “But I was thinking more about the sex that happened afterward.”

“Oi!” Ron said. “Thirty seconds.”

Ten minutes later, Harry sat back feeling both annoyed and elated. Elation won. “That was great,” he said. “But don’t think I haven’t forgotten your betrayal, Ron.”

Ron wiped his eyes. “Hold on, I’m still loving that I actually said that Voldemort has daddy issues. Don’t ruin one of the best moments of my life.”

“He was quite right to call it Potterwatch, I think,” Professor McGonagall said. “Whether you want it to be so or not, the Wizarding world is looking to you. It’ll help rally the troops, as it were.”

Harry responded by refilling his glass, and tipping it into his mouth. He ignored her frozen look of disapproval.

“Don’t look like that, Minerva,” Sirius grinned. “Let the kids have a bit of fun.”

“I suppose...” she said doubtfully. She didn’t say another word about the drinking all night, even when Ron had to lean heavily on Hermione to make it out the door. Harry rather thought that behind her disapproval, she understood the need to let loose. His opinion of her – rather high to begin with – rose even further.

Harry awoke the next day feeling slightly groggy and a little bit hung over, though he had felt plenty worse before. *I have got to stop letting Sirius talk me into drinking*, he thought, though he knew that he wouldn’t. He smirked when he remembered Potterwatch. He almost wished that Voldemort was not now employing Occlumency against him; he would have liked to be there first-hand to witness his reaction.

Yawning, he opened the curtains around his bed. “How’s your head, Ron?” No reply.

His brow furrowed; Ron’s bed looked tumbled and messy, but Ron was not in it. *He drank a hell of a lot more than I did last night. Where is he?*

“Ron isn’t here,” Neville said weakly. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, and held his head in his hands. “Dean and Seamus went to breakfast... Ron might have gone with them...”

Harry glanced down at his watch. It was nine thirty on a Saturday morning. It was not like Ron to be up and about so early, even if they hadn’t been drinking the night before. *He’s probably with Hermione*, he thought. He winced when he moved too suddenly and his stomach rolled. Then he felt a flash of relief when he saw what sat on the bedside table.

"Someone's left us a hangover remedy, Neville," Harry said. He tipped the potion into his mouth and swallowed gratefully.

At the same moment there was a flash of light, and swirling silver mist resolved itself into a weasel. "*Hog's Head Inn. Now,*" it said with Mr. Weasley's voice. Harry's first thought was that it was alarmingly risky for the man to contact him in this fashion... he could have been anywhere, anyone could have heard.

But in the next moment, he was running out of the room, Neville hot on his heels. Mr. Weasley was not stupid; Harry had never known him to take such a risk before. Suddenly, Ron's absence seemed ominous rather than confusing... had something happened to him? Or worse, to Ginny?

"Where's Ginny?" he barked to a fifth year girl who sat in the common room.

"She's s-sleeping!" the girl said. It was hard for Harry to believe that she was Ginny's age. She seemed quite young and stupid.

He did not pause to collect her. He did not know who else was in the room with her, and did not want to send his Patronus with a message that might sound suspicious. He and Neville thundered down the corridor, threw open the door to the Room of Requirement, and raced down to Ariana's portrait.

Mr. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie were waiting for him. The moment Harry saw their faces he knew that something dreadful had happened. That kind of agony and rage could only come from one thing. His heart hammered in his chest, and Harry wondered if this was the moment that he became Merlin. "Who?"

"Percy."

There was a rushing sound in Harry's ears, and the words *always and always* thundered through his very veins. A rage so pure and fierce overcame him that Harry felt a satisfying clarity of purpose. *Vengeance*. The thought was sweet, and the way forward clear. Still, he had to ask. "How?"

“He was taken from the Ministry,” Charlie said fiercely. “We *knew* he shouldn’t have gone back to work...”

“Don’t blame Percy for this,” Bill said in an ugly voice. “Dad said that a Death Eater – Rothfuss – grabbed him and Disapparated.”

“Are you certain he’s dead?” Harry asked. He felt very calm, and he seemed not to need to take as many breaths as normal.

“His body was turned into an Inferius,” Mr. Weasley said. Harry eyed him. For once, the older man made eye contact with him, and Harry saw what he was feeling echoed back to him. “They removed his clothes, and forced him to walk through the Atrium and the Ministry. They”—his voice shook and his eyes filled with tears of grief and fury—“cut a message into him... it was supposed to me a warning not to side with you. I don’t know if they did it while he was alive or not...”

Had Harry not been detached from his body with a fury so intense that Harry felt like he was burning, he might have shown a physical reaction to the news. He blew out a deep breath. “Where is Rodolphus Lestrage? Is he still alive?”

“He is still impersonating Tad Wainwright,” Mr. Weasley said. “Are you—“

“Whatever you’re planning,” Charlie said. “Whatever retaliation you’re going to do, we want in on it. He was our brother. You can’t just—“

Harry silenced him by transfiguring his face into something less recognizable. The nose flattened and the hair turned a burnished gold. It wasn’t perfect, but it was enough. The others caught on and the Weasleys and Neville disappeared, and anonymous strangers took their places.

“We need brooms,” Harry said.

“Can’t we just Apparate?” Neville asked. “We know where he—“

“We aren’t going after Rodolphus,” Harry said. “I was making sure that he was still alive. Merlin – I wish I’d thought of this before. We don’t need *her*.” It was simply that Bellatrix was so intimidating. He

felt almost safer using her body to break into Gringotts, and they'd always planned on allowing the second break out of Azkaban to happen. But they'd never thought that this might happen...

The others exchanged confused looks. Harry noticed this as he started down the stairs. He almost wanted to meet up with a few Death Eaters down in Aberforth's pub—

Percy is dead. His body was desecrated.

Any Death Eaters Harry found today would die. As long as he kept killing, the grief would be pushed back. It was the first death this time around tore Harry up. Every time he blinked, he saw Percy jumping in front of a Killing Curse to save his mother; and then he saw Percy's naked body paraded at the Ministry.

"We need brooms," Harry said to Aberforth. The pub was empty. "Can we borrow them?"

Aberforth did not say a word, but provided enough brooms for all of them. They weren't Firebolts, but Harry and the others were flying out to Azkaban, not playing Quidditch. Harry, still wrapped in an eerie silence, turned to the door. "If any Death Eaters come in, Ab, keep them here. We'll be back for them."

"Harry?" Neville said. "What are we doing? Are we going to get Bellatrix Lestranger?"

Harry ignored him for the moment. "Will you Apparate us as close to Azkaban as we can get?"

Mr. Weasley gripped Harry's arm tightly, turned on the spot and Harry opened his eyes to a lonely vision of the northern coast. It would have been beautiful, had Harry been able to see it without the image of dead Percy superimposed over it. Harry was glad that he did not need to give a full explanation of what they were about. He did not intend on stopping at Bellatrix, however.

"At least the dementors are gone," Bill said.

Harry moved forward with purpose. They only had four obstacles standing in their way. Four Aurors guarded the initial wards. Ever since the dementors had left to serve Voldemort, Azkaban had been pathetically guarded. Harry and Dumbledore had allowed this, as they had thought he had needed Bellatrix, and now it worked to Harry's advantage. The four Aurors—

Three. The first guard to the wards that surrounded Azkaban they encountered was Nymphadora Tonks. "Harry?" she whispered, once Harry had stepped close enough. She looked utterly flummoxed to see him. Obviously, the news about what had happened to Percy had not traveled here yet.

"Hi, Dora," he said lightly. "I'm glad you're here. We're going to break into Azkaban."

"Why?"

"They killed Percy," Harry said simply.

Her mouth fell open, and her eyes filled. "Oh no," she said. "No..."

"This works," Harry said. "You can let us in the wards. I didn't particularly want to Imperius anyone... I'm not very good at it, you see." He wondered if he would be able to pull off that curse now. The cold that suffused his limbs made him think that he just might be able to. Harry stood aside while Bill and Charlie Stunned the other Aurors. Mr. Weasley's jaw worked, and Neville stared off into the distance, not really seeing.

"Let me kill her," Neville said. "I want to do it."

"Neville, it was our—"

"There are enough for all of us," Harry said. "And Bellatrix tortured his parents into insanity. And I want to watch him kill her."

And he did. He realized that a small part of himself had wanted Neville to be the one to kill Bellatrix Lestrange ever since that Christmas on the closed ward so many years ago. Neville had died

before he could kill her, though, last time, and it had been Molly Weasley who had killed her. But not this time...

Charlie and Bill were staring at him, and Harry could not read their expressions. They weren't uncomfortable—

"I think I was wrong about him being fine with sacrificing Percy," Charlie said.

Harry mounted his broom. *I would have done this had any of you died the way Percy did*, Harry thought. He did not say it out loud.

"The wards are down, Harry," Tonks called.

Moments later, the five of them were racing toward the black speck in the distance that grew nearer and nearer with each passing second. The island fortress was a grim monolith that jutted out from the ocean like an ugly scar. The chill in Harry's bones ached, despite the fact that the dementors were long gone. It permeated the walls, and radiated out.

The fortress prison was alive with the clamoring yells of prisoners, though as Harry followed Mr. Weasley to the high security area, no guards were in sight. Perhaps the wards were enough to keep them contained. And the prisoners didn't have wands. It was only through luck that Sirius had been an animagus.

Mr. Weasley blasted the door apart with more force than was strictly necessary. The wards were down, after all. But Harry's elated sense of purpose grew. It felt right, no matter that they were about to kill wandless people. But it wasn't murder, it was a public service. It was vengeance. And it prevented any of these Death Eaters from doing it again.

Charlie grinned fiercely at him, and Harry returned it.

"Don't burn them," Harry said. "We want Voldemort to recognize them."

Mr. Weasley muttered something under his breath.

“Sorry?” Harry said.

Mr. Weasley met his eyes again. He was pale and sweating; he looked like Neville had when Umbridge had been using the Cruciatus Curse on Luna: furious and sick from it. “They killed him,” he said. “Murdered him, and then sent him back. I’ll never – how in Merlin’s name do you forget something like this?”

“I’ve never been able to,” Harry said. He heard scuttling and indistinct voices... he wondered if there was some sort of Muffling Charm placed around the separate cells. He would have thought that Bellatrix would be screeching at him. “It isn’t something that you can forget. But this... Percy won’t have died in vain.”

“I’ve found Bellatrix,” Neville said in a strange voice. He had moved ahead, and now stood in the shadows. Harry followed him.

Bellatrix Lestrange looked dirty, unkempt, and completely insane. She stood a foot back from iridescent bars, and was obviously screaming at them. “Hey, Bella,” Harry said. “How do you like being back in Azkaban? I’m sorry that all the dementors have fled... You know, you’re one of the few people who are actually improved by dementors.”

Neville took his cue, and relaxed a little. Harry watched as his friend’s face hardened even further. The last of childhood fled Neville’s features as he stared at the woman (the monster) who had stolen away his parents. He raised his wand, and whispered, “*Crucio!*”

Bellatrix fell back, writhing and screaming silently. Mr. Weasley muttered a spell, and then Harry could actually hear the screaming. She stopped abruptly and, panting, got to her feet. Neville looked shaken. Harry put a hand on his shoulder.

“I don’t think – I don’t think I can do it this way,” Neville said. The skin around his lips was white.

“Do you want me to do it?” Harry asked quietly. “One *Sectumsempra* and she’ll be dead.”

A ghost of a smile flitted across Neville's face. "Oh, no. I've been wanting to do this for a very long time. I just don't think I can use the Cruciatus Curse."

"Filthy – blood-traitor," Bellatrix panted. She leaned up against the wall.

"Did you enjoy it?" Neville asked her. "Did you enjoy torturing my mum and dad and whoever else?"

She tossed her long hair out of her face, and gave him a heavy-lidded stare. "I always enjoyed it." Harry could tell by the look in her eyes that she knew she was going to die, and wanted to go out defiant.

"*Pretoria*," Neville said. The Death Eater screeched and fell to the ground. Her kneecap became suddenly unrecognizable – the bones had been shattered. "I would have done it quickly if you'd lied," Neville told her. Harry, Mr. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie watched, completely silent, as Neville broke nearly every bone in Bellatrix's body.

At one point, her eyes rolled back in her head, and her endless shrieks ended. "*Ennervate*," Mr. Weasley said.

"*Pretoria*," Neville said again, and her right hand looked like a glove filled with small pebbles. "*Pretoria*," he said one last time. Her spinal cord was obliterated, and Bellatrix Lestrange died. Her eyes were wide and unseeing; her mouth was open in a silent scream. Harry breathed deeply, as though he had just run for a very long time.

Neville leaned his head up against the bars. "They really are stupid, aren't they?" he asked in a shaky voice. He looked as if he were about to be ill. Harry couldn't blame him. "They should have known that the children of those they tortured and murdered would eventually come after them."

"And their parents," Mr. Weasley said.

"And their brothers," Bill said.

"I want the Carrows," Harry said. "They tortured Ginny..."

There were nineteen Death Eaters imprisoned in Azkaban – counting Bellatrix – and all of them died within the hour. Harry slashed Amicus Carrow from throat to groin, and compressed his sister's lungs. Yaxley fell to a Bludgeoning Hex to the head... he was just recognizable enough. Mr. Weasley made quick work of the four Death Eaters that he killed.

"Let's gather them together," Harry murmured. "How best to transport them, do you think?"

"Transport them?" Mr. Weasley frowned. "Are we going to take them to Grimmauld Place?"

"Of course not," Harry said. "We're going to drop the bodies over Malfoy Manor."

Mr. Weasley sighed and looked away. He raised his wand and began to destroy the bars around the bodies. Harry watched Charlie kill Dolohov, and wondered how many lives had just been saved by that act of what some might consider brutality. He also wondered how many murders had just been avenged.

"There was a time when I never would have considered this," Mr. Weasley said quietly.

"I know," Harry said. "I've never actually done anything like this either."

"I wish Ron was here," he said.

Harry thought he might know why Mr. Weasley wished that. Ron had, in fact, become increasingly hostile over the last few months. Ginny had as well, though she did not have minor outbursts at her parents with as much frequency. Conversely, Harry's bitterness had been fading. He looked at Mr. Weasley, tall and balding and avenging the murder of his son, and thought that today might have been the death of it.

"Ron will come around," Harry said, though he did not sound convincing. He hoped that Ron came around. Both he and Ginny. Harry didn't want them to be bitter and resentful after he died. He wanted to think of them surrounded by their family... he knew that

they would not celebrate the defeat of Voldemort, not since it meant his death, but he hoped that Ginny especially would not be mired in regret. "You could defend yourself, you know."

"How do I defend myself against a son and daughter who sacrificed everything to save my life?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Harry opened his mouth, about to say something though he hardly knew what to say, but was interrupted by the appearance of Neville, Charlie, and more bodies.

"We're going to drop them over Malfoy Manor for Voldemort to see," Mr. Weasley explained. Charlie looked pleased.

"Bill's almost done," he said. "He's just finishing up Malfoy... he's drowning him with *Aguamenti*... I never thought of that use for the charm."

Charlie's face was flushed, but his eyes no longer had the glassy look of rage. He was beginning to come off it... Harry felt a twinge in his stomach and realized that he was too. The rage that had protected him from the grief and loss was fading. He wanted to hold onto it, because it felt like strength, and Ginny would need him to be strong.... But even he knew that it was a false strength.

"Let's go," Harry said. He scrubbed his face with his hand. It came away bloody; he was covered in Amicus Carrow's blood. He ignored it.

Harry bound four bodies together, lightened them, and levitated them out to where they had left their brooms. "Grab your brooms and the bodies," he said. "I'll Apparate all of you to Wiltshire... that's where the Malfoys live."

It took six trips, but Harry got the rest of them the closest he could to Malfoy Manor. It was protected by powerful wards, and was invisible to Harry's eyes, but thanks to his knowledge of the future, he knew exactly where it was. "They'll be able to get through the wards," he said. "They've still got Dark Marks, even though they're dead..."

He mounted up and kicked off. The others followed closely behind him. He flew slowly, looking for familiar landmarks. "There," he pointed. There was a shimmering section in the field below. He continued on until he was absolutely certain that they hovered directly over Voldemort's lair. "Shield them so they don't go unrecognizable once they hit," he advised. "And let's get back to Grimmauld Place as soon as we drop them."

"Wish we could see his reaction," Charlie said darkly.

"Maybe Snape will be there," Harry said, though he hoped Snape was already safe at Hogwarts. He had a feeling that Voldemort's rage would be terrible.

He used his wand to cut the ropes that bound the bodies together, shielded them, and let them drop. The others were a split second behind him; and as soon as the bodies started to drop, Harry rolled his broom and Disapparated.

There was a split second of silence once the five of them had arrived in Kreacher's domain, and then Mrs. Weasley screamed. "WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN? THEY'RE BACK, EVERYONE!"

Footsteps thundered down the stairs, just as someone arrived by Floo. "I still haven't seen them," Ron said. He stumbled when he saw Harry. "What the hell?" he said blankly. "What happened to you? All of you?"

Harry gaped at them. Did they not know that Percy was dead? He glanced down at his watch. Harry had known for less than two hours – *holy shit, is it still morning?* – and he supposed that it might not have been made public. He felt sick. Ginny appeared just then, and threw herself into Harry's arms.

"Ginny," he pulled away. "We've got something to tell you. Percy—"

"Oh, shit," Ron said. "I was right. I told you!"

"Harry, listen," Ginny said.

“Percy is dead,” Mr. Weasley said heavily. “The Death Eaters got him this morning... Molly—”

“What did you do?” Mrs. Weasley covered her mouth with both hands.

Harry thought this was an odd question, though Mrs. Weasley might be in shock. She might not believe that Percy was dead. He felt like he had lived several years since he had woken up. “We went to Azkaban and killed all the Death Eaters in there,” Harry said grimly.

Ron started to laugh.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Charlie hissed. “Percy was—”

“Not killed,” said Percy.

Harry swayed on his feet and Ginny caught him before he fell over. He could only stare at Percy in shock. The slightly messy red hair, the horn-rimmed glasses, and the tall frame were all Percy; the Polyjuice Potion would not work with dead people, and if Percy was actually a Death Eater, he never would have made it into this house. Harry’s eyes stung and he suddenly could not stand up. He felt ill with relief, and he put his head on his arms. “Thank God,” he said. Ginny stroked his back.

Mr. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie stampeded Percy. Harry looked over, and saw tears streaming unabashedly down Mr. Weasley’s face. Charlie was white with shock, and Bill simply gaped at his brother. Harry pushed himself up to his feet, strode over to Percy, and hugged him.

“So,” Charlie said. “Anyone want to tell us what the hell happened?”

“Snape,” Ron explained. “He and some other Death Eater were ordered to drag Percy back with him. But Snape wouldn’t do it—”

“Of course,” Harry murmured.

“Snape wasn’t with Rothfuss,” Mr. Weasley said thickly. He kept reaching over to touch Percy, to grip his shoulder, or ruffle his hair. “Had I known—”

"Snape *Imperiused* Rothfuss to grab Percy and bring him to the Hog's Head," Ron said.

Harry took his glasses off and wiped them. He felt a great lump in his throat, and he was afraid that if he continued to look at the very much alive Percy, he would break down. "I assume it was Rothfuss under the potion, then?"

"Nope," Ron said. "Snape thought of a way to kill two birds with one curse. Me and Sirius dragged out Draco Malfoy, the little bugger."

"You and Snape and Sirius collaborated on this?" Harry asked in disbelief.

"Yeah," Ron said. He looked slightly uncomfortable, as if the notion surprised him as well.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Harry said.

"Because we Obliviated Rothfuss," Ron said unapologetically. "And we knew you'd be unhappy with that. But Snape didn't have much time, and we couldn't think of a different solution."

"*Scourgify*," Ginny murmured, and Harry became marginally cleaner. "If it's any consolation, Harry, I had no idea what was happening until half an hour ago, when we realized you, Dad, Bill, Charlie, and Neville were missing."

"I thought you might have gone after Death Eaters," Ron said. "But I have to admit that I didn't expect Azkaban. Did you leave Bellatrix alive?"

"No," Neville said shortly. "I crushed her bones."

Ron gaped at him, and then turned to Harry. "What're we going to do—"

"Rodolphus," Harry said. Ginny gripped his hand, and he realized that he was trembling from the aftermath of feeling rage and relief in equal measure. "We should've thought of that before... but she's dead now."

And Voldemort knows they are; we dropped the bodies over Malfoy Manor.”

“We all lost control,” Mr. Weasley said.

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Author's Note:

I really wanted to call this chapter “Harry Goes Ape Shit” but I didn’t think that went well with the rest of the story. ;) I have a feeling that Harry’s actions (and that of the others) are going to be questioned. Here is my reasoning for the brutality: Harry has already suffered extreme loss, and the loss of Percy made him quit thinking clearly. The others, who know of a rather terrible future, have been influenced by Harry. No second chances.

Anyway, I would love to have feedback for this particular chapter. I hope you more bloodthirsty readers enjoyed the Death of Bellatrix Lestrange.

And... be prepared for a conversation with Merlin coming up in the next few chapters... grin

Chapter 38 – Fight

The time that stretched between the middle of October to the Christmas holidays was fraught with tension. November passed with little fanfare, and the days slid on toward Christmas; the Death Eaters and Voldemort were quiet, and as the days passed Harry's nerves tightened to the breaking point. Voldemort would not allow the deaths of his best Death Eaters go without revenge, and Harry knew that the next move would be worse. He almost wished that Voldemort was not now performing Occlumency against him... he wouldn't mind having a warning. He was only grateful that the Muggleborns had been protected to the best of the abilities of the Order of the Phoenix.

"Mr. Potter!" The ire in Professor Octavius' voice told Harry that this was not the first time that he had been called. "I realize that it is the last day before the holidays, but I would appreciate it if you could pay attention."

Harry forced himself to stop thinking about the Muggleborns and dragged his attention back to his Ancient Runes class. "I'm sorry, Professor." He felt a moment of disorientation. How was it possible that he was still in class and that the entire world had not stopped because of the war with Voldemort? He wondered why the teachers and the parents and the students had not hunkered down and hidden away until the war ended...

Professor Octavius harrumphed. "As I was saying... we're beginning study on the truly abstract principles. Prepare your minds over the holidays, as the next term will be quite taxing for all of you – except, perhaps, Miss Granger, of course."

Hermione beamed and Harry could not help but grin back at her. Daphne Greengrass – who sat far away from them as she had adopted her new role of pureblood enemy for her own safety – flashed them a bright smile. "Thank you, Professor Octavius," she said. Ron nudged Harry, and they shared an exasperated and amused glance.

"Now each rune will evoke feelings," said the professor. "We are not here to discuss these feelings, merely to study, and for this first time

that you view them with the knowledge you have gained over the years, I am putting a Silencing Charm on each of you. Clear your minds, and allow the runes to speak to you and to your magic. Write your impressions of the shape... try not to describe what they make you feel."

Harry and Ron exchanged dubious glances. *Allow the runes to "speak" to me?* Harry thought. *Sounds more like something in Professor Trelawney's class.* Still, when Professor Octavius passed out three runes each to all of them, he bent his head to the task. The first was "melchiora" which Harry knew meant 'honor'...

He stared at it. It seemed to grow before his eyes until he felt slightly small. Not in a bad, insignificant way... but he remembered how it felt to stand on the beach at Shell Cottage and watch the waves. It felt similar to this, and he could see the crest of a wave in the shape. And yet he also saw a bit of Hogwarts in it... he could see it clearly in his mind's eye as it had been the very first time he had seen it. It made his heart beat rather quickly, and he glanced around at Ron and Hermione. They were both completely engrossed, and did not notice his stare.

He spent the next ten minutes describing the rune for honor, and was not entirely successful at describing the height of Hogwarts, the power of the sea, or the other forces that, like honor, reminded him that he was just a man and subject to a man's foibles, without adding personal touches. *Every curve and every line evokes something worth striving for, and yet cannot be completely attained. It imitates the essence of honor, that lofty goal that leaves me reaching for it and never quite grasping it fully.* Harry was forced to scratch out line after line as his quill would get away from him every now and again.

Once he was satisfied that his brief composition was as impersonal as he could make it, he pulled the second rune toward him. He smiled wryly when he saw that it was 'ytry' which meant courage. It was even more difficult than honor, and he labored over it. A headache built up in his head, and sweat broke out over his brow. He kept his left hand on his wand, and it seemed to tingle. *The runes call to the magic,* Harry thought.

There was little time left in the class by the time Harry got to the third rune. *Damn*, he thought glumly as soon as he recognized it. *Emotional pain*. How could he not recognize this rune? He had seen it in his dreams, had been haunted by it since the end of his third year. He sighed, prepared himself for a very unpleasant few minutes (he resolved to finish this as quickly as possible), and glanced down at the inscription—

His mouth fell open in shock. *Alionay*. *Love*. Not pain. Love. He did not even look at the rune but stared at the etched word beneath it. His mind felt blank. He knew that he had just come across something important, something crucial. And yet he could not grasp his thoughts. They whirled and swirled in his head and he could make neither head nor tail of them. Why had the rune for love been so painful for him?

“Harry?” Hermione’s voice startled him so badly that he nearly fell off his chair. “Are you all right?”

Harry looked around. The other students were filing out; Daphne Greengrass disappeared out the door while he watched. Professor Octavius was gathering up papers and runes. “I – I didn’t finish, Professor,” he said.

Professor Octavius looked down. “Ah, yes,” he said kindly. “This one is difficult for some.” He did not add anything further.

“Which ones did you have?” Ron asked as Harry gathered up his things. “I had wisdom, temperance, and solidarity. The wisdom one looked a lot like Dumbledore.”

Hermione snorted. “Considering the fact that it is theorized that the runes appear differently to different people, I’m not surprised.”

Ron grinned at her. “I’m sure it would have shown the same thing to you, Hermione,” he told her. “Possibly everyone in this class would’ve seen Dumbledore, wouldn’t they?”

“Point taken,” she admitted, and clasped his hand. “I had knowledge”—she slapped Ron in the stomach when he let out a bark of laughter—“camaraderie, and innocence. I saw a book, of course, in knowledge... but also a chessboard and a *hand*, for some reason... I

never figured that out. I'll have to visit the library. Camaraderie... I saw all of us"—she lowered her voice—"you know, the Order of the Phoenix. I swear, I think I even saw Tonks' pink hair."

"What about innocence?" Harry asked when she paused. He was surprised when her cheeks pinked.

"I saw a child," she said. "My child."

Hermione's face took on a luminosity that was almost painful for Harry to witness. Hermione and Ron... they would have children, he was certain of it. They'd have a houseful (or just a few) of freckled, red-haired children with big brains and lots of courage. They'd have Ron's sense of humor, and Hermione's sense of justice... and Harry wouldn't be there for it.

"Let's go to dinner," he said abruptly. He shook his head sharply, unwilling to examine why the thought of his future nieces and nephews made his heart ache.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry found it slightly ironic that the Christmas during *this* sixth year had the same frosty quality as the one last time, though for very different reasons. Everyone was crammed into Godric's Hollow for a great feast provided by Mrs. Weasley, and everything was nearly perfect... except nearly all the smiles on every Weasley's face was fake.

He could not help but blame Ron and Ginny. He did not like doing so; he loved the both of them very much, and he felt very hypocritical. But he saw the way Mrs. Weasley tried too hard to gain their approval. He saw how none of the others would really meet their eyes – he'd gotten used to not having eye contact with the Weasleys, but seeing their shame made him feel guilty.

I never should have shown them those memories in anger, Harry thought. The situation between himself and the Weasleys was cordial but distant. This was the best that he could hope for. But Ron and Ginny needed their family, and it was rapidly coming to the point

when Harry would have to step in the way Sirius and Snape had done for him.

Fortunately (or unfortunately, Harry was still not sure) the situation came to a head in a way that he did not anticipate. *It was rather like getting something extremely unpleasant over quickly*, he thought later that night as he got into bed. He hoped that the Killing Curse would be just as effective. *It didn't hurt last time*, he mused. *It could've been a lot worse*. He did not know whether he was thinking about the rather spectacular Weasley fight, or getting hit with something that most people did not survive.

It began with Ron, of course.

Mrs. Weasley handed out lumpy packages to all of her children. Her hands shook when she came to Ron and Ginny, and Harry felt the tension in the room become so unbearable that he watched Sirius, Remus, and Tonks escape the sitting room. He thought longingly of joining them, but winced when he realized that the situation was about to explode, nine Weasleys were between him and the door, and the chance had passed him by.

Ron very slowly and carefully opened the package that contained the famous Weasley sweater. Considering the fact that Harry knew his best mate as well as he knew himself, this did not bode well. *Do not drag me into this*, Harry thought at Ron. *Do not say a word about the fact that I don't have one*.

Ginny had not yet opened hers. It sat on her lap; her hands were folded over it. This was, perhaps, even more ominous than Ron's deliberate actions.

"Sweaters, Mum?" Ron said very quietly.

"Yes," Mrs. Weasley said. Her voice only trembled a little. Harry felt like covering his ears. *Why did I leave my wand in the kitchen?* For the first time since he had been living here, Harry wished that he did not feel quite so safe in this place. If he'd thought that Voldemort might come rushing in, he never would have set his wand down beside the mashed potatoes and come into the sitting room. *Opening presents sounded like such a good idea*, Harry thought glumly. And

since he didn't have his wand, he couldn't make himself temporarily sightless and deaf.

"Well," Ron said. "This is a step up from last year, isn't it?"

"Indeed," Ginny murmured.

Harry stayed quiet. They deserved the chance to air their grievances, but he had a feeling that they were going to hurt their family rather badly. He just wished that he'd run out of the room. His muscles actually tensed, and he was ready to spring forward.

Ron leaned back in his chair, affecting a deliberately casual pose. Only Ron, Ginny, and Harry appeared to be breathing. "Last year," he said comfortably. "Remember how last year we were dark? And Harry was an evil maniac?"

"We didn't get a sweater last year," Ginny said. The paper crinkled as she fisted her hands. "Our family obviously didn't trust us enough yet."

"Ginny," Mr. Weasley said in a soft voice.

Harry pressed his lips together. He wanted to intervene... but his wife was hurting. He saw the way the corner of her mouth trembled. She was hurting, had been hurting, and the anger came from the place inside of her who felt betrayed by her entire family except Ron. Perhaps they just needed to talk it out.

"But now we're suddenly the golden children," Ron said in a hard voice. "We travel back in time—"

"ARE YOU GOING TO THROW THAT IN OUR FACES EVERY CHANCE YOU GET?" Mrs. Weasley shouted. Harry blinked and realized that Mrs. Weasley's mouth trembled just like Ginny's. "How many times – I don't"—she put her face in her hands and started to sob—"I don't know what else we can say."

"It's the single greatest regret of my life," Mr. Weasley said firmly. He was gazing at his hands. "And I speak for your mother as well. We were... so blind."

"We were so *worried* for the two of you," Mrs. Weasley cried into her hands.

"Yeah," Ron said. "Worried about *Harry*, and how he was turning us dark. We *told* you over and over again that Harry wasn't dark or evil."

"I know," Mr. Weasley said. Harry was glad to see that he was defending himself. "Don't you think we've thought about this? How many times – and in how many ways – did you tell us?"

"Countless," Ginny said. "And *don't* mention Harry touching me. I told you then that I'd initiated it. It was a mistake we both made – I told you that."

Harry put his head in his hands. He could tell by the tremor in Ginny's voice and the way Ron breathed slightly quicker than normal that they were well aware of the complexity of the situation. The Weasleys had not trusted; they had turned their backs... but they'd come around with scant proof, they had offered to fight, and they had done everything they could to help ever since. And because they hadn't known about the time travel, it was almost impossible to blame them. But their actions had cut Ron, Ginny, and Harry to the bone.

"And where's Harry's sweater?" Ron asked loudly.

"Don't," Harry said quickly. "Leave me out of this." He turned to Mrs. Weasley. "Don't answer him."

"Harry," Ginny said in a quiet voice. He shook his head.

"I've made my peace," he said in her ear. Unfortunately, Ron was close enough to overhear.

And just like that, Ron and Ginny immediately focused on him. *Wrong choice of words, Harry*, he told himself. "What do you mean you've made your peace?" Ron asked in a low, dangerous voice.

"Shut up, Ron," Harry said fiercely. He absolutely did not want to talk about the fact that he was slowly coming to realize that his death was coming, and Hermione – brilliant though she was – was not going to

reach into another fairy tale and find a miracle for Harry. “Why don’t you focus on cutting up your family some more?”

“Are you defending them?” Ginny asked incredulously.

Harry looked around. Mrs. Weasley was still crying; Mr. Weasley had his hand on her shoulder. The older Weasley brothers – even the twins – were solemn and shaken. Ron and Ginny were now standing, and their arms were folded across their chests, and their faces were alight with righteous anger and deep hurt. Harry understood both, but the looks on the Weasleys’ faces broke his heart.

Harry sighed. “Yeah. I am.”

Ron actually took a step backward.

“It’s worse for both of you,” Harry said. “I admit that. You’re hurting and feeling betrayed. And I agree with you. But”—he gestured to the Weasleys—“*look* at them. I think,” he took a deep breath. “I think that you’ve got to forgive them and stop punishing them, or... or stop seeing them. Bitterness is a choice, Ron.”

There was a long moment of stunned silence.

“Harry’s right, Ron,” Hermione said softly.

Ron’s jaw worked; he looked furious... but his eyes were wet. “Where’d you get that idea?” he asked. “The ‘bitterness is a choice’ bit.”

Harry’s mouth twitched. “Snape told me.”

Ron was about to open his mouth, possibly to express his shock that Snape would say such a thing, when Mrs. Weasley spoke up. “I think,” she whispered. “I think we ought to leave. This isn’t – it isn’t working, is it? We did too much damage. We’re staying in the Order,” she said firmly.

Harry watched as one by one, the Weasleys picked themselves up off the floor. *Don’t let them leave*, Harry urged silently.

"We're not going to let you fight this out alone," Mrs. Weasley said. She bent and picked up the sweaters she had made for her children. "But... it was too much to expect. And you don't – you don't really need us anymore, do you?"

"Don't need you anymore?" Ron said. He sounded completely and utterly shocked.

Ginny let out a burst of laughter that bordered on hysteria. She was very close to sobbing, Harry knew. "How can you possibly—"

"We know what you've sacrificed for us!" Mr. Weasley interrupted. "We *know* and we're never—"

"Hold up," Ron held up his hand. "Traveling back in time wasn't a sacrifice at all. You're dead wrong about that. We lost everyone. *Everyone* except the three of us. Using the Tears of Merlin was the easiest decision to make."

"You don't – you don't regret it?"

And just like that, Harry watched the rage and hurt begin to fade with alarming rapidity from Ron and Ginny's faces. He wanted to tell them that of course they didn't regret it... they regretted the necessity of it. But he did not feel comfortable speaking up in this moment that was so fraught with emotion.

"Mum," Ginny whispered. "How can you ask that? It's a miracle that we're here. Do you know that sometimes I – sometimes I dream that we're still in that horrible future. And then I see you again... and even though I'm angry and hurt and everything, the first thing I think is how wonderful and amazing it is that we've been given a second chance."

"Yeah," Ron said. "Me too."

Harry closed his eyes briefly, feeling a small surge of guilt that a part of him still wished that he somehow could have brought *his* Weasleys back with them. And that he could have died for them. But that was an impossible desire, and he shoved the thought away as soon as it flitted across his mind.

Ron nudged Harry. "I can't believe that Snape was right."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Listen," Ron said. "Don't leave." But his family was frozen; they did not appear to be moving anywhere. "Don't. I"—he raked his hand through his bright red hair—"I've been – look, I... what I'm trying to say—"

"Honestly, Ronald!" Hermione said. She sounded exasperated, but the look in her eyes was very tender and gentle. Harry looked away. "You've got the emotional range of a teaspoon..."

"Mum," Ginny said softly. She'd moved forward so that she stood in front of her mother and father. "Dad... I've been a little selfish, I think. I know that I... I have – *had* – good reasons for being angry. But – hearing that you think that we don't need you... it breaks my heart. Because we need you."

"Even though we weren't there for you when you needed us?" Mr. Weasley asked tentatively. There was a note of hope in his voice that caused a lump in Harry's throat. "When we were blind and a little stupid?"

"The thing is," Ron said. He seemed much shaken that his attitude had caused his parents to think that he didn't need them. "You're here now. And – well, we know what it's like not to have you. So – *damn*, of course we need you."

Ginny threw herself into her mother's arms just as Ron stepped forward to hug his father. Harry found himself grinning so widely that his cheeks actually hurt. The dissipation of the tension and the rising joy in the room was a palpable force. He threw his arm around Hermione and watched as his wife and Ron rejoined their family. His heart ached a little, and he felt a little lonely, but it added spice to the utter happiness that he felt in that moment. It was enough for him that Ginny and Ron were gifted with this. It really was.

The most noticeably different members of the group were perhaps Fred and George. The moment after they had hugged their brother and sister, they'd retreated to a corner behind the Christmas tree, and

were plotting something exceedingly mischievous, judging by the looks on their faces.

"In light of the recent events," Fred boomed once Ron had pulled his sweater over his head.

"We've decided that we need to make a confession," George said.

"We need to come clean," Fred said.

"We're Merlin," they said together.

Harry did not believe it for a moment. He could not say why, exactly. They were smart enough, certainly. But it simply didn't fit the pieces of the puzzle. Not by a long shot. But... what if they were playing a very deep game? He glanced around and saw a mixture of disbelief and uncertainty on everyone's faces.

"We used the – er—"

"Trojan Horse method," Fred supplied in a stage whisper.

"Yeah, that," George winked at him. "We used the Trojan Horse method. We've been taking turns possessing each other—"

"Yes," Fred smiled broadly. "What you are thinking is actually true: sometimes I am George and he is Fred."

"We've gotten a bit confused ourselves," George said. "What with two Georges running around—"

"—or two Freds," Fred said indignantly. "Sometimes I'm the one who comes back."

Harry snorted, and Ginny let out a little giggle. Her eyes were red-rimmed, but they were alight with laughter. Nearly all the doubt had faded – of course the twins weren't Merlin. Though they could just be burying the truth even further. But Harry still thought that *he* was the one to come back in time, but nothing was really set in stone—

"That is impossible," Hermione said. Then, doubtfully, "isn't it? It isn't really the two of you?"

Fred and George just smiled slyly. "How do you know it isn't?"

We don't know, Harry thought. I wonder if we'll ever find out...

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Author's Note: *Sorry for the long wait, but I've been going through and making sure that I know what I'm doing. I am pleased to say that someone has guessed the identity of Merlin! A few of you have questioned me about the sequel: yes, it is Merlin's story. Speaking of Merlin, an incredibly perceptive reader asked me if Merlin's existence in the story changed the prophecy at all. Yes, it most certainly did! One little word (I'm thinking you can guess it) was added.*

Also! As an added bonus, I will soon be revising Voldemort's interlude to include his reaction to the rain of bodies. I will let everyone know in an author's note when this has happened (though it may not be until AFTER Backward With Purpose is complete). This will also explain some of the questions you may have regarding the fact that what happened in Azkaban doesn't seem to have been made public knowledge.

I've also been getting A LOT of messages about the Deathly Hallows. looks around Hmm. I think that we all have our own opinions and perceptions. And keep in mind that this is an Alternate Universe story.

Some of you may have noticed that this chapter is 1) not as long as the others, and 2) doesn't have that much action in it. I thought about having this chapter and the next be in one, but I decided that I wanted this burst of sweetness before the hammer falls. :D

SOMEONE SHOOT ME NOW! THIS CHAPTER IS A RANK PIECE OF CRAP! *Why I ever thought I could write anything... inarticulate sound of frustration*

Chapter 39 – Confession

Harry was just drifting off to sleep, feeling slightly overwhelmed after the events of Christmas Day with Ginny and Ron, when the door opened. He really ought to have known that something was going to happen. As soon as he heard the creak and Ron's heavy footsteps, he groaned. He should not have let himself be lulled into a false sense of security.

"We need to talk, Harry," Ron said. "No use trying to get out of it."

Harry sat up with a sigh and reached over for his glasses. "I'm tired," he said. It sounded weak even to his ears. Ginny and Ron rightfully ignored him. *How did I not notice that she wasn't drifting off to sleep?*

"So," Harry said. "I'm really glad that you two and your family are working things out."

"I am too," Ginny said.

Ron shook his head. "As soon as you said it about making a choice, I knew you were right."

"I wanted to before that," Ginny admitted. She laced her fingers with Harry's. "I just – it's so hard to do. Or it seemed like it would be hard. And I still resent them a little—"

"But it's like... I dunno," Ron said. Harry knew exactly what they were trying to articulate as he had experienced something similar, though he imagined that it was far worse for Ginny and Ron. He hoped that the last of their resentment would burn away sooner rather than later. And he hoped that they would have a more fulfilling resolution than he had. Mr. Weasley and the older two Weasleys were extremely uncomfortable around Harry after what had happened at Azkaban... and that only served to reinforce the fact that it was too late to enjoy the relationship they had shared before.

Ginny gazed steadily at him. She had guessed his thoughts as she often did when he was feeling something particularly deeply. She took a deep breath. "You made a promise, Harry."

"I know," Harry said. "And I'm keeping it the best way I know how. But..."

"But," Ron said in a strangled voice. "I hate that word."

"You swore to me that you would do everything you could to... to... try to prevent this," Ginny said. Her lips trembled a little. "But you—"

"You really think you're going to die, don't you?" Ron said. His voice was a little loud, and Harry wondered if they ought to put a Silencing Charm on the door. They were sandwiched right between two occupied rooms, and Percy and Hermione would be able to hear if they got much louder. Merlin knew that Sirius, Remus, and Tonks would be able to hear Ron, and they were on the opposite side of the house and on a different floor.

But Harry felt like a great weight was compressing his chest. "I just don't see another way around it," Harry said.

"Hermione—"

"Not even Hermione can pull miracles out of her books," Harry said quietly. "And I've got her looking for it in the ancient magics. I think she's beginning to suspect—"

"She isn't," Ron said firmly. "She has no idea."

"I think we should tell them," Ginny said. "I've always thought that it was a mistake not to."

"No," Harry said. He sounded harsh. "Absolutely not."

"I can't believe you don't—" Ron began.

But Harry cut him off. "I SAID NO!" he shouted. He was breathing rather heavily. He turned away from both of them and stepped toward the window. He'd chosen this specifically because he could not see the ruined cottage where his parents had been murdered. For the first time, he regretted this. He wanted the both of them to be quiet. The thoughts that he had been trying to push down for months were about to break free and he did not want to voice them.

“Harry, if this is about being noble—“

Harry interrupted Ron again, his stomach churning. “It’s the exact opposite of being noble,” he gripped the window sill so tightly that his knuckles turned white. His voice was very loud but he couldn’t seem to help himself. Ron and Ginny were silent, and he knew that they were communicating their disbelief, and this angered him so much that he could no longer dam up his mouth. “I DON’T WANT TO DO IT!”

There was a swift intake of breath from both Ginny and Ron, and a ringing moment of silence, and then Harry let the words flow. “I don’t want to do it, all right? The idea – it’s been festering – and the idea”—his throat closed, but the words kept coming—“of dying and leaving you behind, Ginny, makes me physically ill.”

“*Harry—*“

“I’m positive that this is why the power is terrible,” Harry said. He felt suddenly calm and certain. “I’ve thought it for a while now. And I did *not* want to tell you this... but if other people knew – if other people knew, I just don’t think I could do it. Not with them... knowing and watching. Not with the pity... I honestly don’t think I’d be able to do it.”

Ginny drew in a deep, shaking breath. “It had better not be,” she said fiercely. He turned around and faced her and saw that her face was streaked with tears. “And even if it is – if I have to go back in time another five years and become Merlin. *I am not going to let you die.*”

“That’s another thing,” Harry said. “I’ve been thinking – what if I’m Merlin? What if I find out... what if I find out that I can’t do it after all—“

“You’ve done it before,” Ron said quietly.

“Because I thought everyone was dead,” Harry said. He raked his hands through his hair. It was an entirely different thing; this situation and the other would be as dissimilar as night and day. He vividly remembered standing in front of the Killing Curse, desperately wanting to die and not even fighting it. And then he came back to defeat Voldemort once and for all, but he’d had no intention of staying.

He'd gone out in the Forbidden Forest, wondering how best to die until he'd been found by—

"Harry," Ron interrupted his thoughts. His voice was much lower than normal. "I can't imagine what you're feeling right now. You know me... I've got the emotional range of a teaspoon."

Ron paused. Harry waited but Ron didn't say another word for long minutes. "I guess what I'm trying to say is," Ron said heavily, "I think you're selling yourself short. You're the bravest man I've ever met."

Ron did not understand that it wasn't about bravery. He wasn't afraid of death, not really. He even understood a little what Dumbledore had said long ago, about death being the next great adventure. For some inexplicable reason, the image of an empty and sparkling white King's Cross station drifted into his mind, but Ginny caught his attention by reaching for his hand. *I want to grow old with her*, Harry realized. *I wish I could go on to the next great adventure after a long life with children and grandchildren... and Ginny's face, old and wrinkled and beautiful, the last thing I see, not Voldemort's...*

He knew that he was being selfish and it shamed him, but he couldn't seem to help it. This was exactly why he hadn't wanted to mention it to either of them... it had opened the floodgates. He wouldn't even say that he pitied himself; he would much rather be the one to die than have this burden passed to anyone else he loved. Rage at Voldemort and his rape of ancient laws of magic surged through him.

"Don't think I'm not going to do it if I have to," Harry said. His sudden anger made his voice sharp. "And I think I'm going to have to, I already said that. The Deathly Hallows have slipped through my fingers, and I can't imagine that items that forestall death are littering the ground..."

Ron and Ginny looked as helpless as he felt.

"What," said Hermione, "is Harry talking about?"

Harry whirled on her. She wore a faded dressing gown, her hair was mussed and hung around her face, and her feet were bare. Her eyes were wide and fearful, and Harry started cursing, using every foul

word from Ron's arsenal. "Damn it," he finished. His fingers itched on his wand and he wanted desperately to take away her memories. It was obvious to him that she had heard enough. "Go make sure that Percy didn't hear," he said to Ron.

"Are you going to answer my question, or are you going to keep swearing at me?" Hermione tried to make her voice sharp, but it quavered and broke. She lifted one shaking hand to cover her mouth.

And this was exactly why Harry had not wanted her to know. He knew that she loved him like a brother... he knew that his friends loved him as much as he loved them. And he did not want to see their faces when they realized that Voldemort would be defeated, that the world would become a safer, brighter place... but not for him. He could not imagine being in her shoes, in Ron's shoes, and *especially* in Ginny's shoes. He did not think that he would've been able to let them go if any of the others had been a Horcrux.

"He's still asleep," Ron said in a quiet voice. He raised his wand and put a Silencing Charm on the door. Harry sat down on the bed and put his head in his hands.

It was Ron that told Hermione everything. Harry simply could not do it, but the only alternative would be to take her memory from her, and he couldn't do that either. Ron explained the true nature of the prophecy – *neither can live while the other survives* – and also told her about the Deathly Hallows, and how they had protected him in his first timeline.

Ginny had her head on his shoulder. She did not look at him, but Harry could tell by the halting breaths she was taking that she was crying. Harry's eyes burned, but he did not cry. He had not become such a coward that he would cry for his own death. Everyone died. He wasn't afraid of it... he just didn't want it to happen so soon...

Hermione moaned as though she were in pain. "So this – this is why – the Cloak... you were both so angry... it makes sense," she tried to sound like her rational, calm self, but it didn't work. She looked up. "I hate Voldemort," her face crumpled. "When I think – when I think of... *it shouldn't be like this!*"

"I agree," Ginny said.

"Hermione," Ron said gently. He took her by the shoulders and turned her to him. "Have you *ever* come across anything – well, besides evil things like Horcruxes – that would let Harry survive the Killing Curse? Something like the Deathly Hallows... anything at all?"

"No," she said in a very small voice. "No. Nothing... but maybe – maybe I just didn't believe... I'll have to start researching all over again." Her face fell into grim lines, though her eyes were wide and helpless, and she could not seem to look at Harry for longer than a moment. Harry knew that she did not think his chances of survival very high, though he also knew that she would exhaust every resource.

She began to pace, swiping furiously at her eyes every once in a while. Harry, Ginny, and Ron watched her... hoping to see that familiar expression of triumph when she solved a particularly difficult puzzle, Harry did not take his eyes off of her. She paused for a long moment, her back to them. "I can think of only one other... way, I suppose... Harry's mother—"

"Absolutely not," Harry said firmly. "*No one* is going to jump in front of that curse for me." He looked from Ginny, to Ron, to Hermione. "No one. Merlin, I wouldn't be able to live with myself after that. I really wouldn't."

Hermione covered her face with her hands. "Damn it," she sobbed. "I know this is why you didn't want to tell the rest of us – but *damn* Voldemort. *Fuck him!* I just... I don't understand how this is fair, how this could be possible. *Fuck.*"

It wasn't fair, Harry knew. But life was messy and sloppy and fairness rarely played a part in it. It was strange... but something in her grief and sorrow steadied him. She was able to freely say what the small part of him that railed against the necessity of dying because some asshole had delusions of grandeur and had walked roads paved with blood to reach immortality. He felt oddly lighter, though he did not like to see her cry. He supposed it must be cathartic...

“I’m going to look,” Hermione announced, shuddering. “I’m going to look. I’ll look everywhere I can—“

“First you need to sleep,” Ron said. He began steering her out of the room. She allowed him to for the first few steps, but then she spun around and launched herself at Harry and threw her arms around him.

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured in his ear. He patted her on the back as a brother might.

She left soon after, and Harry and Ginny crawled back into bed and lay facing each other. The silence between them was not awkward or uncomfortable, just... Harry did not have words for what he was feeling in this moment. And he knew that Ginny suffered from the same affliction.

“It’s just too big,” Ginny said. “Too big for words.”

Harry couldn’t agree more.

Chapter 40 – Interlude: Neville Longbottom

NEVILLE LONGBOTTOM

NEVILLE LONGBOTTOM

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This, as with the Voldemort interlude, takes place after the events of a future chapter. There's a purpose for this, so bear with me! The events of this chapter take place in March.

Also, I am sorry for the long delay. Real Life has me over the Great Barrel over the Universe. My Big Girl Pants have been down around my ankles, and has been belting me. The story is almost done, and I swear that I won't make you guys wait this long for another chapter again. Expect the next chapter by Friday.

As always, reviews help oil the process (thank the person who reviewed today for this update, actually), and honest opinions and thoughts are appreciated.

As an added bonus, the voice off screen in this chapter is Merlin!

Neville Longbottom's palms were sweating when he Apparated right outside the innocuous looking entrance to St. Mungo's. He did not even bother looking around. He knew what the street looked like at any angle, at any time of day... his parents lived here, after all. His gut clenched when the knowledge that Mad-Eye Moody was here for a damn good reason hit him again. *He's never going to be the same*, Neville thought.

The backs of his eyes ached, though he did not cry. He knew that he shouldn't be here. Harry would be greatly annoyed with him for putting himself in this kind of danger. His cover could be blown, Neville knew, but he could not stand to have the proud Auror fall into the clutches of the Death Eaters. Not when he was vulnerable, like Neville's parents. They would torture him to death, and Moody would not understand why.

He leaned his forehead against the cool glass for a moment. He hoped... he hoped that he wasn't too late. He winced as he passed through the barrier. He staggered, and blood dripped onto the floor. He strode over to the Welcome Witch, who looked up at him, annoyed. "You don't need me to tell you where to go," she said. "You can read the sign."

"Alastor Moody," Neville said. "Tell me where he is."

Her eyes widened. "He's a special case," she said.

"Tell me," he said through gritted teeth. He did not want to hurt the witch, but the slow rage that had been building since he had seen Professor McGonagall fall was crashing over him, and his fingers itched for his wand.

"I was told—"

Neville had his wand on her so fast that she squeaked and fell off her chair. He didn't lower it. "I can guess what you were told," he said. "You reported it immediately when he was brought in, didn't you? And then you were told to keep him here until someone came to get him?"

"Y-y-yes," she stammered.

"Do you know who was coming for him?" Neville pushed relentlessly. This witch did not wear the Dark Mark. She was not a Death Eater. But she collaborated with them... *everyone* knew that Voldemort had taken over the Ministry, thanks to Potterwatch. He wanted to kill her.

"The Ministry," she said. Her eyes were very wide and large in her pale, round face.

"You stupid bitch," Neville said. "*Where is he?*"

"P-p-permanent Spell Damage," she whimpered.

He twitched his wand; she screamed, but he only imprisoned her with black ropes. She struggled against the bonds, but soon gave up. "I have no idea why we're fighting for people like you," Neville said. And he didn't. Not really. There was absolutely no reason why this woman

had to alert the Ministry to the presence of a known supporter of Harry Potter. She had known what would happen to him. Mad-Eye... defenseless and insane. Like Neville's Mum and Dad...

He did not run. He strode quickly toward his destination. Neville had never considered himself good at Divination. He'd not been one to look in his tea leaves and see the death of his bunny, like Lavender Brown. He did not have a prophecy hanging over him like Harry... and thank Merlin that it had not been Neville Longbottom as the Boy-Who-Lived, because Neville never would have been able to do it.

But as he walked, he felt a creeping unease. The portraits seemed to stare at him. *They should*, Neville thought uneasily. His arm and his leg still bled freely, enough so that he was growing light-headed. That must be why he'd started to think that he wouldn't be leaving St. Mungo's. He could not Apparate or Disapparate directly inside... he'd already wasted a precious hour unconscious, and the Death Eaters... Voldemort would want Moody as quickly as possible.

He broke out into a trot, shoving by people and Healers alike. No one attempted to stop him. He climbed up the stairs, and through the double doors. He was right around the corner—

"NEVILLE LONGBOTTOM!" he heard someone shout.

He instinctively ducked around the corner, just as a jet of red light flew by his head. *A Stunning Spell?* He thought in disbelief. *Must be a baby Death Eater.* He was sprinting now, and whoever was behind him was casting stunners every few moments, but Neville had learned from the best...

"STOP!"

Neville slammed open the door to the Permanent Spell Damage Ward, and closed it with a resounding thud. He sealed it with a muttered spell and turned, looking for Moody's dark form lying on a bed. "*Lumos*," he said.

Moody was in the bed closest, and he appeared to be sleeping. Neville wondered if he'd still been agitated. Did the Healer have to give him a Calming Draught? Had he still been screaming? Neville's

eyes were burning badly now, and his stomach churned when he remembered what had happened during the fight. The Death Eaters... the curse... the way he'd moved and churned and screamed, and Neville had been completely unable to do anything. *Damn him*, he thought fiercely.

He hated the Body Bind Curse.

He could not say for certain what alerted him. Perhaps one of them had made some sort of noise. Perhaps he realized that the room was unnaturally quiet. Perhaps it was because he stared down at the still form of Alastor Moody, and remembered him drumming the words 'Constant Vigilance' into his head during all the training sessions. Or maybe it was a combination of all these reasons. But he *knew*, and he twisted and leapt behind the bed before the curse could hit him.

"Playing hide and seek?" came the gruff voice of Fenrir Greyback. A fist clamped around Neville's stomach. *I do not want this werewolf around my parents*, Neville thought, panicked. He narrowed his eyes, and listened very carefully. They were under the Disillusionment Charm, and he thought there were nine of ten—

Blood dripped down on his hand, and Neville peeked over the top. He squeezed his eyes shut when he saw the torn throat clearly, and the pool of blood that swiftly grew and dripped over the edge of the bed.

"*Deprimo!*" Neville screamed, wand raised at the ceiling. It came crashing down, and he could hear bodies jumping out of the way just he jumped. He crashed into the bed curtains, righted himself, and ran for his parents. Flashes of light followed him, but they managed to miss him... he dove over the bed of a woman – Felicity Upton, he knew, who had tried to become an Animagus with disastrous results – and rolled under another set of curtains. He knew what her silence meant, but he refused to think on it.

Not Mum and Dad, not Mum and Dad, not Mum and Dad...

"—he's sealed the door," said a female Death Eater.

"Have you pressed the Mark?" said a male. "He'll be interested to know that Potter has someone else on his side."

“How do you know it isn’t Potter?” said another.

--they’re all dead—

“We’d already be dead,” Greyback said. “Shunpike told me about what happened at Azkaban. He said it rained bodies at Malfoy Manor.”

I was there at Azkaban, Neville thought fiercely. He touched the side of his father’s neck, searching for a pulse. It wasn’t there. He did the same for his mother. She had been murdered as well. Rage rose up in him like bile. The patients here had been as defenseless as children. But Greyback liked killing, maiming, and torturing children...

Neville felt an intense clarity of purpose that he had not even felt when he had stood before Bellatrix Lestrange and taken his revenge. There was no way that he would be able to make it to the door... but the door had been sealed, and the Death Eaters could not escape. *I am going to die... but I want to take them with me*, Neville realized.

But he had to warn them not to come. Harry could not save him – he felt a pang when he thought of the guilt that Harry would suffer. He raised his wand to his lips and, thinking of the fact that he might’ve been able to fulfill the destiny of defeating Voldemort had the mantle been on his shoulders, he cast his Patronus. “Tell Harry Potter: ‘Trap at St. Mungo’s. Don’t come, we’re already gone. Don’t blame yourself. I have no regrets. Tell Ron, Ginny, Hermione, and Luna – if they aren’t there – that you have been the best friends I could ever have... I have no regrets.’”

“The boy thinks he can fight us,” Greyback growled. They seemed to be biding their time; they were playing with him.

Neville straightened his shoulders. He was not afraid, though he regretted that he hadn’t kissed Hannah Abbott under the mistletoe like he had wanted to... He stepped around the corner, and found himself face to face with the Death Eaters.

Time seemed to slow. Neville raised his wand and shouted an incantation that Dumbledore had taught him, though had cautioned him not to use it unless he was in dire need. The Fiendfyre erupted

from the tip of his wand, and the room was aglow with fiery monsters. He kept his back straight for as long as he could. The Death Eaters tried to escape, but they fell, screaming in pain.

There were moments of pain so intense that Neville knew that he would surely die from it... and then remembered that he *was* dying. And he was taking the rest of the Death Eaters with him as he went.

Darkness swirled around him and he fell into it. Everything ceased. The pain, the shouts, and the roar of the fire... it *stopped*. He was warm, but not burning. He felt a vast inrushing of peace that tingled from the tip of his head to the bottom of his feet.

“Open your eyes, Neville,” said his mum. “We waited for you...”

“Come on, son,” his dad said. “Let’s all go home together...”

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Author’s Note:

Yes... Both Moody and Neville really are dead...

Pooky: I’m sorry. I jfdi’d.

Chapter 41 – Flight

The days eased by. Harry spent the time skiving off his classes more than he ought to either spend time with Ginny in the Room of Requirement, or to spend time in the library with Hermione while she searched through every single book to find a miracle. This had led to arguments and snappish retorts.

“I wish you would tell Dumbledore,” Hermione said pointedly one day in early February. “He could be of so much help—”

“No,” Harry said implacably. There was no way that he was going to tell Dumbledore that he was too much of a coward to face his own death without a safety net. Merlin, how had he ever wanted to know everything about his destiny? Why hadn’t he realized that Dumbledore had genuinely been protecting him, and if Harry had known too soon, he would have felt... much the way he did now? How could he possibly have resented Dumbledore? Sometimes he even wanted to have his memory wiped, and only be told moments before...

Hermione glared at him, but after a few moments, the look in her eyes softened. Harry looked away, jogging his leg and wishing that Ginny was out of Charms already so they could spend the next several hours in blissful oblivion. “Have you tried the *Tales of Beedle the Bard*?”

“Yes, Harry,” Hermione said. “Several times. I’ve looked through other books of fairy tales... there was one legend about a Russian stone, but it only heals from the *brink* of death, not from death itself.”

“Nothing foreign,” Harry said. “We don’t have the time. We’re running out of it as it is.”

Hermione’s lips twisted; Harry appreciated the effort it took her not to fling her arms around him again. Not that he minded it when she hugged him, but her desperation reminded him of... things.

They never spoke of it. As the days had passed and January had stormed into February, the clock had been ticking. News from the

Ministry, courtesy of Mr. Weasley, Kingsley, and Dora, had been coming steadily. Voldemort had bewitched more and more members of the Ministry. Soon it would fall.

Harry was increasingly impatient with this fruitless search. He did not want to die, but he knew that he had to. It seemed like such a waste of time, though... he looked over at Hermione, and wondered if this was her way of saying goodbye. He wouldn't put it by her; she was clever and rational enough to know that this was a fool's hope.

His suspicions grew when he realized that her eyes weren't moving across the page, rather she was blinking away tears. He opened his mouth, though he had no idea what to say—

But what interrupted by the appearance of Kingsley's lynx Patronus in the air above the table. "*The Ministry has fallen.*"

Harry was already on his feet, and his heart already raced with adrenaline. He pulled the Marauder's Map out of the pocket of his robes, and thanked Dumbledore's foresight in forcing all the fourth year students and below to remain in their own common rooms after dinner. This decision had been vastly unpopular, but it made getting the Muggleborn students to safety vastly easier. He also thanked Sirius' long-nurtured skills at finding ways to break the rules. Without the charm that turned the names of the Muggleborns blue, it would be far more difficult.

"Get the Ravenclaws," Harry said.

"I know," Hermione said. She sprinted off down the corridor. Harry wasted no time, but lifted the modified copy of the Marauder's Map up to the light, and searched out the first bright blue dot he found. It turned out to be Justin Finch-Fletchley.

"It's time," Harry said grimly. "Can you start looking for members of your House? Get them to the Room of Requirement as quickly as possible."

Justin paled and looked mildly ill, but he nodded. "I've got my Map on me. I'll look for all the Hufflepuffs."

Harry raced down the corridor. He found three sixth year Ravenclaws together. "Listen," he said. Their eyes were wide. He did not even have to fight the urge to grimace. Whatever awe they felt of him could only help in this moment. "All three of you need to get to the seventh floor corridor."

"Why?" one of the girls asked. She looked confused. Harry thought her name might be Susannah Upton, but he couldn't be sure.

"Because Voldemort has taken over the Ministry," Harry said. "And you're Muggleborn. You know what that means, yes? Hogwarts isn't safe for you."

Susannah swayed a little on her feet, and her friends gasped.

"Exactly," Harry said. "Look, I haven't got time to explain now. Just get to the corridor, will you?"

Harry was satisfied when they left at a near run. They were in Ravenclaw, which meant that they weren't stupid. They knew exactly what it meant. If the Ministry had fallen, the school would fall soon enough. Voldemort would be wary of Dumbledore... which was why Dumbledore was going to "die" tonight, at the hands of Severus Snape.

He hoped that somehow he would be able to see Voldemort's face when he realized how many people who were supposed to be dead were actually very much alive. He imagined it would shock him. Those scarlet eyes would widen with surprise and (Harry hoped) fear. He briefly imagined Voldemort soiling his robes when he caught sight of Dumbledore – alive and wielding the Elder Wand – but that seemed like too much to hope for...

"Harry!" Sirius hissed. "Did you get hit with a curse?"

His godfather's voice startled him out of his fantasy, and Harry shook himself. "Er, no," he said guiltily. "I was just imagining Voldemort pissing himself."

Sirius snorted. "That explains the vague smile. We've got more important things to do, Harry. Save it for later."

“Right,” Harry nodded. And with that, he and Sirius went sprinting in opposite directions.

Evacuating the Muggleborn students out of Hogwarts was both easier and more difficult than Harry had imagined all at the same time. He kept an eye on the Map (every once in a while a horrible chill would pass over him as he contemplated attempting to do this without it), and saw with great relief that a great many blue dots streamed up the seventh floor corridor and disappeared.

Less than one hour had passed, and only three Muggleborns were left. Harry was sweating, and not just because he had been running the length of Hogwarts with his heart nearly beating out of his chest. The Portkeys would take the students away to safety, and Harry had to deliver them on time. Besides, Ministry officials would be here at any moment to arrest Dumbledore, Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione and any Muggleborn they would find.

That won't happen, he thought to himself, grimly. And as he sprinted through the corridors, past the curious paintings, and through the hidden passageways and down stairs, the thought that he was doing his best to save the innocent pushed him. When his legs grew tired, and his lungs threatened to escape from his chest, he remembered the sharp, sick pain when he had realized that Voldemort had unleashed Fiendfyre on the sleeping students. It was his strength.

“Potter!” Professor McGonagall said sharply.

“One more,” he panted. “Outside... got to...”

“I’ll go,” she said urgently. Her face was pale, and her lips were compressed in a very thin line. “They are at our gates. You mustn’t be seen.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but she cut him off. “I’m still a professor,” she said, drawing herself up to her full height. “They won’t arrest me immediately.”

He glanced down at the Map. He wondered, vaguely, how angry Ginny would be if she found out that she had put her name in a different color from the rest, so he could spot her easily. He did not

see her dot. He searched it intently, looking for Ron and Hermione. He did not see their dots either.

For a moment, he was grateful that he was not witness to what surely must be pandemonium and confusion in the Room of Requirement. He hoped the students were cooperating... he hoped they had the sense to realize the amount of danger they were in. In his mind's eye, he saw a long stream of wary, watchful students traversing the distance between the Room of Requirement and the Hog's Head Inn. He hoped this was the case.

He folded the Map with slightly sweaty fingers, tucked it back in his robes, ducked behind a suit of armor, and cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself. And then he waited. Suddenly, without warning, a voice boomed in his ears, and once he heard the message for the first time, his entire body went numb with relief.

"By the authority of the Ministry of Magic," someone said with an air of great pomposity and gravity, "every student, professor, and everyone else on the premises are to convene in the Great Hall. Noncompliance will be met with due punishment under law. I repeat: by the authority of the Ministry of Magic, every student, professor, and everyone else on the premises are to convene in the Great Hall. Noncompliance will be met with due punishment under law."

Harry wondered what sort of punishment would be suitable for refusing to go to the Great Hall. Life sentence in Azkaban? Death? The murder of one's family? He gave his head a sharp shake, as though clearing it of cobwebs, and made his way inside the hall. He kept to the back, in the shadows, and watched as dumbfounded students began trickling in.

Harry was still hidden by his charm when the Ministry officials – though he supposed he ought to think of them as Death Eaters, as they were pretty much one and the same – entered the Great Hall. There was dead silence. Dumbledore sat in his chair, appearing to be perfectly relaxed, but he was the only one. Harry's body hummed with adrenaline, but he did not fret that everything would explode in their faces. He could not allow himself to worry.

The students at the Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor tables were pale, frightened, and beginning to understand why they had been called here. There were empty seats, and confusion and the stirrings of horror made the tension in the room almost palpable. Even the Slytherins were subdued, though the children of Death Eaters seemed terrified and jubilant all at the same time.

He eyed Daphne Greengrass. She sat between her sisters, Astoria and Ophelia. Her face was pale, gaunt even, and Harry could tell that her fingers shook from nerves. He did not know if this was from the fact that the darkest wizard in recorded history had just taken over the country and the only person who could stop him was a sixth year she called 'Harvey'... or, it could be that she was anxious about being a distraction.

If things went to hell, she'd be in as much danger as Snape. He glanced again at Astoria and Ophelia. *More danger*, he thought. *Voldemort will go after her family.*

Loud voices in the Entrance Hall alerted Harry that he needed to make his way to the platform upon which sat the professors. He strode between the House tables, focusing on the pale, silent students rather than those who smirked. It wouldn't do for him to curse one of them at this critical juncture. He walked on silent feet. Only Neville turned his head slightly as Harry walked by. The rest were wondering when it was that the world had changed, and did not look up at an inexplicable breeze.

Dumbledore stood, and Harry paused. The older wizard looked grim. Harry felt an answering swirl of emotions: deep, abiding fear and worry that had nothing to do with what would actually happen today, and everything to do with how this would play out to its inevitable conclusion... Harry did not want to contemplate losing anyone else; strangely, he also felt a sort of satisfaction that Voldemort – who had seemed nearly unstoppable last time – had played into their hands.

"I believe that this unceremonious intrusion at our school means that we must assume that Voldemort has seized control," Dumbledore said. His voice was strong. "The Ministry workers who have—"

He was interrupted by the doors slamming open with such force that they bounced off the walls. Harry thought inexplicably of Professor Quirrell... he had opened those doors in the exact manner. Harry almost expected to hear the warning of a troll in the dungeons. But Quirrell was long dead (twice), and the danger to Hogwarts was not in the dungeons, but entering the Great Hall. There was no troll, only a werewolf, two Death Eaters, and seven genuine Ministry officials.

Harry's blood ran cold at the look of delight on Fenrir Greyback's face. He eyed the younger girls lasciviously, resting upon a first year Ravenclaw the longest.

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore," a Ministry official said loudly. "You are hereby arrested—"

"—charges?" Dumbledore interrupted pleasantly.

The official faltered, as if surprised that Dumbledore had thought to ask. An ugly, furtive look crossed his face, and Harry clenched his wand. "Sedition," he said. "Treason against the Ministry—"

In the next moment, there was a rumbling sound. Harry automatically looked up at the ceiling, as though he would find the evidence of an approaching storm on the enchanted ceiling. The echo of thunder continued, and in the few seconds it lasted, all ten of the arriving supporters of Voldemort had been halted, as if they had been glued to the floor.

"Treason," Dumbledore said softly, though his voice carried. Everyone in the room heard it. "What a funny way to describe what I've been doing. The Ministry," he said loudly, "exists to protect, defend, and serve the Wizarding population of our nation. What you see today, children, is the result of a government that had become so used to having power, that its original function is only a memory."

Harry continued forward. Dumbledore had still not taken a sip of his drink. Harry could not blame him. This would be Dumbledore's last chance to address the students before it was over.

"Do not blame this on Voldemort," Dumbledore said harshly. "Had the Ministry of Magic been strong, united, and unwilling to let crimes go

unpunished, Voldemort would never have had a chance. Blame weak leaders like Cornelius Fudge who were blinded by power so much that they never saw the responsibility that comes with it. Blame witches and wizards like Dolores Umbridge who twisted the function of the Ministry and made a mockery of justice.”

It seemed as though no one breathed. Harry watched with grim satisfaction the struggles of the ten who had been chosen to kill Dumbledore. Ten of them... and they'd still not had a chance. He beamed at Dumbledore, though he knew that he was still invisible. He walked around the High Table. Professor Flitwick turned his head as he passed, though he said not a word.

“This is where we part ways,” said Dumbledore. He reached down to the goblet before him. “One last toast, if you will,” he lifted the goblet high in the air. Harry had to admire his flair for the dramatic. “A toast to friendship, camaraderie, and love, all of which we have found together in this gracious building,” he sipped, long and deep, and Harry’s insides squirmed. “In the dark – and I assure you, they will be very dark indeed – days before us, this is what we must cling to. Brightness and light. Friendship and love—“

Dumbledore pitched forward onto the table, convulsing, and slid over the table and on to the floor before it. Harry did not know if he did that on purpose. He must have done. It was too perfectly placed to be entirely natural.

Professor Sinistra gasped and made to help—

“Do not touch him,” Snape said slowly, carefully. His wand was raised and pointed directly at Professor Sinistra. His face was utterly implacable, and Professor Sinistra sat back and stared down at her fingers. There was perhaps ten seconds of ringing silence, and Harry heard several girls – or boys, he supposed – begin to sob.

Dumbledore made a few animalistic grunts and fell still. Too still.

Snape gave a casual flick of his wand, and the Silencing Charm and Sticking Charm were lifted from the invading force from the Ministry. Greyback strode forward, prodded the body, and tilted his head back

in a wild howl of celebration. Harry had to restrain himself from opening up the werewolf's chest with the Cutting Curse.

"Dumbledore," Snape said delicately, "has deserted the school. It seems a new Headmaster must be chosen—"

"—it'll be you, Severus," Greyback said easily. He glanced around at the teachers, all of whom were now under the threat of wands.

"He's got my vote," Sirius said. He leaned back in his chair. A lock of hair was in his face, and he suddenly looked quite young to Harry. Another actor, he was playing his part almost as well as Dumbledore had. His hand trembled, as though he were too afraid to say something snide. "Professor Snape will make an excellent Headmaster."

"Your flattery will get you nowhere," Snape said coldly. "Your teaching position – Defense Against the Dark Arts, is it? – is now obsolete."

"That's not a problem," Sirius said. "I can teach the Dark Arts, too. I'm a wizard of many talents."

"We'll see," Snape said.

Harry looked around the room. Draco was dead. Lucius was dead. Narcissa had apparently gone insane, and had not been seen outside Malfoy Manor in months. No one here knew that Sirius would *never* condone the Dark Arts...

He looked up at Snape and Sirius. If any two men could protect the students without the world knowing the truth, it would be them. Harry wondered if whoever wrote that damned article so many years ago had known that it would eventually make his life easier. *All this caution makes it much easier to move in the shadows—*

Greyback stepped away from Dumbledore's body, and Harry walked over. He leaned over so that any movement he made would be hidden by Dumbledore himself. He levitated Dumbledore's body an inch off the ground. He placed a small, Muggle toy with the likeness of a man with a fake, plastic smile, underneath. He sat back on his

heels and pointed his wand at the second closest torch on the wall. With a whispered incantation, he made it flicker and die—

“I welcome the presence of the Dark Lord’s servants at our school!” Daphne stood up. She spoke very loudly, and her voice hardly wavered at all.

“You traitorous bitch!” Ernie Macmillan yelled, right on cue. He stood up abruptly.

“You simpleton,” Daphne retorted. Bright spots of red bloomed in her cheeks. “It’s over. The Dark Lord has won, as we knew he must,” she turned to Snape. “I swear allegiance,” she said.

“Duly noted, Miss Greengrass,” Snape said smoothly. He left the Head Table. “There will be no tricks, no fighting, no disobedience. The rest of you would do well to follow suit.”

Don’t notice the missing Muggleborns, don’t notice the missing Muggleborns, don’t notice the missing Muggleborns, Harry chanted to himself. All eyes were now on Snape. Harry waved his wand, and the furthest torch died. He counted to six and cast the Disillusionment Charm on Dumbledore—

Sirius did his part, and the Muggle doll was transfigured into the body of Dumbledore at the exact same moment. Harry’s heart pounded in his chest, and his hand shook a little as he levitated the body further. Walking the length of the Great Hall while invisible had been simple, and Harry had thought nothing of it. Walking the length of the Great Hall while invisible and with Dumbledore’s body with him was frightening.

One wrong move and it would all fall apart. Snape’s cover would be blown. He cleared the Hufflepuff table. Sweat poured down his face. *If someone unexpectedly hits me...* He forced himself to keep going at a quick pace. He had only a moment before they realized that he was not there, and that the Muggleborns were missing as well.

He was nearly running. He could hear Snape speaking. He supposed he was saying more of the same drivel. *Thank you, Snape,* he thought. *Keep talking for as long as you can. Just keep talking.* None

of the Ministry officials or Death Eaters would want to offend Snape, who was the closest thing Voldemort had to a best mate. *Keep talking...*

The moment Harry and Dumbledore made it through the doors, he broke into a trot. He ran across the Entrance Hall and out into the courtyard. The cold wind hit him like a fist. He ran over to where he had stashed his Firebolt, whispered the spell that would make Dumbledore's body easy to transport, climbed on, and flew into the air. He felt a great sense of relief as he pointed his broomstick toward the gates and raced toward them. He passed over them and, without the slightest hesitation, twisted in midair and Disapparated.

HPHPHPHPHPHP

"Welcome to the home for dead people!" Fred said loudly, once Dumbledore had recovered enough to leave one of the guest rooms at Grimmauld Place. George snickered. Neville, who had arrived just ten minutes prior, saluted.

"Aren't you two supposed to be helping get the Muggleborns to safety?" Percy asked. He leaned up against the door with his arms folded. Ollivander, who had taken a break from making wands in Sirius' mother's old room, laughed.

"We got them all settled," George said. He rested his head on the arm of the sofa. Despite his light tone, he looked tired. "Once all the Portkeys brought them—"

"—we had to explain everything about three thousand times," Fred rolled his eyes.

"I'm sure you did," Dumbledore murmured.

"Are you all right, Albus?" Harry asked. He was feeling pleasantly relaxed. He'd just received a Patronus from Ginny: She would be home in five minutes. She was just finishing last minute details. Now that the ordeal in the Great Hall was over, Harry knew that his job had actually been easier than explaining the new facts of life to Muggleborns and their Muggle families. He did not envy Ginny, Ron, and Hermione their tasks.

“You were under Polyjuice, right?” Harry said suddenly. “And the rest of you? If any of them decide to leave—”

“*Of course* we were under the potion,” Fred said.

“Yeah, *Mummy*,” said George. “You know we always use Polyjuice.”

Harry sighed with relief. “It’s just for the best. Better not to let anyone know.”

“Hi there, honey,” Ginny said brightly. Harry turned his head so fast that his neck popped. “Have a nice day at work?”

“Work was a little boring today,” he said, grinning. “Slow. Not much happened.”

“The Ministry was taken over by You-Know-Who,” Fred said.

“Dumbledore died,” George continued. He nodded at Dumbledore, who gave a cheery little wave.

“We sent all the Muggleborns off to the Muggleborn Preserves,” Fred said.

“Just another day,” George finished, nodding sharply.

“Boys,” Molly Weasley said tiredly. She was rather thinner and paler than she had been over Christmas, Harry noted. He felt a deep sense of appreciation for her. This – having a workable plan for what to do when Voldemort took over – had made all the difference. He remembered the months of uncertainty, loss of hope, desperation that had made up these same months last time, and he was glad that things were so much different now.

Dumbledore was clearly thinking along these same lines. “To the woman of the hour!” he said. “I would offer a toast, but the last one killed me...”

Harry laughed. Snape had mixed a (relatively) harmless potion: the Draught of Living Death and a mild Convulsing Draught. It had been enough for everyone in the room, however. Dumbledore was officially

dead... and Snape was the one who had killed him. *Funny how things like this happen again... except so differently...*

Mrs. Weasley flushed a deep red, making her entire head look like a fiery sunset. He grinned at her, more than willing to honor her achievement. Creating the Muggleborn sanctuaries across Britain (and, indeed, France, as the Delacour family had offered to help) had been her idea. Arranging the Portkeys (and placing them on individuals without their knowledge) had largely been her job. And uniting the Muggleborn students with their Muggle families had been *her* idea, *her* plan, and had stemmed from her tender heart.

"Brilliant, Mrs. Weasley," he said. Several of the Weasleys looked around at him in surprise. He ignored them, though he felt himself blushing. "Excellent, really excellent."

"Thanks, Harry, dear," she said. Harry felt an odd little hitch in the vicinity of his chest at the words "Harry, dear." How many times had he heard those words with that same inflection? He gave his head a sharp shake.

"Harry?" Neville said. He was staring at Harry with an unfathomable look on his face. "Can I talk to you for a moment? Before we start up Potterwatch? Only because I've got to head back to Hogwarts right after..."

"Sure," Harry said. He stood up, smoothed his robes, and followed Neville out the door and into the hall. Neville glanced back at the open doorway, out of which spilled light and voices made loud with relief. Then he led them down the stairs and into the basement kitchen. It was very quiet, and Harry was just starting to feel a hint of foreboding.

"I've – er – been... well, I've seen you around them," Neville said. He sounded deeply uncomfortable. "And... you know. Ron and Ginny."

Harry grew more confused by the second. "What?" He said blankly.

"The Weasleys," Neville said in a quiet voice.

Harry blinked. He hadn't been sure what to expect, but this was not it. "The Weasleys?"

"Do you – er – remember when we went to prune the Flaming Roses?" Neville asked. He did not wait for Harry to reply, but continued on after setting his jaw. "You – er – really set me straight, you know? I was... insecure. I didn't feel... you know... like I was actually an asset. No, don't give me that look. I don't need to be told why I'm in Gryffindor."

Then what does he want?

As if reading his thoughts, Neville took a deep breath and said, "I think you're being a bit brainless about the Weasleys, mate."

Harry briefly ran through his last encounters with the Weasleys. He hadn't been rude, he'd listened to them, he'd laughed at Fred and George's jokes, and even though Mr. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie were uncomfortable around him, he'd made an effort to include them in discussions. *What did I do?*

"See?" Neville said a bit forcefully. "You don't even know what I'm saying."

"Er... no, I don't," Harry said honestly.

"You're perfectly nice to them – *now*, at least – but you hold them at a distance," Neville said. "I wouldn't even call it arm's length. More like... you keep a—"

"—chasm," Harry said. He abruptly remembered his dream. He was on one side of the chasm, and the Weasleys were on the other... and in between, like a bridge, was the rune that meant love. He'd thought it had been pain at the time, but now that he knew it was love... he did not like the fact that he was still afraid of it.

"Yeah," Neville said, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet. "Why is that?"

Harry didn't answer for a long time. A part (though small) was that the more the Weasleys loved him, the more it would hurt them when he

died. But that instinctive protectiveness was only one tenth of the reason why. He was afraid of several things, one of which was the fact that the Weasleys couldn't possibly ever love him the way they once had. Too much had happened. The other... he did not need any other reasons for his legs to feel like lead when he went out to meet his death.

But he could not really explain this to Neville. Neville did not know about the Horcrux inside of Harry, and Harry did not want to open that discussion in this moment. So he offered the only reason he had that was not tied to his impending death. "It won't ever be the same, Neville. We won't ever have that same kind of... rapport—"

"Bull shit," Neville said succinctly. "Yeah, maybe it wouldn't be the same—"

"Not even close—"

"*Bull shit*," Neville said again. "Think about Sirius. You knew him in your first timeline for what? Two years? Are you telling me that you weren't close? That you didn't love him?"

"No," Harry said. He tugged at his collar. "But it wasn't the *same*, Neville. We didn't have the same kind of history—"

"You thought he was trying to kill you for an entire year!" Neville said. "You told me. For an entire year you thought that he'd betrayed your parents to Voldemort and was now coming after you! But once you realized that he hadn't..."

Harry furrowed his brow. The comparison made no sense—

"The Weasleys figured out a year ago that you aren't some sort of monster," Neville said firmly. "You're like Sirius and they're like you... there's no reason that you couldn't have a close relationship again."

"But—"

"And don't tell me that too much time has passed," Neville said heatedly. "If my parents came back to their right minds *today*, I

wouldn't give a *shit* that they didn't raise me, or didn't know me until now."

"Neville—"

"The only thing standing in your way is you, Harry," said Neville. "Merlin's saggy balls, Harry. You *traveled back in time* for these people! And now you can't forgive them? You draw the line at something that should be ridiculously easier than using the Tears of Merlin? Yeah, they fucked up big time, but—"

He interrupted himself and ran his hands through his hair.

"I'll try," Harry said abruptly. He wanted to leave this kitchen. He wanted to get back to the big crowd that would enable him to turn off Neville's words. They were running through his head, but they kept coming up to this gigantic barrier... and Harry did not want that barrier breached. "Listen, I'll try. We've got to go, though. We've got to get back to the... the room... we've got to do Potterwatch."

"All right," Neville nodded. He did not meet Harry's eyes, and Harry had the impression that he was vastly uncomfortable with the amount of emotion that he had displayed. The thought made his stomach churn, and he forced himself to think of something else.

The last thing he wanted to do was dwell on Neville's words.

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Author's Note: *Remember that this chapter takes place prior to the events of the last chapter! This kicked my ass. It really did. Kicked. My. Ass.*

Chapter 42 – The Holy Grail

The next month was so busy and full that Harry fell into bed exhausted every night. He had initially thought that his part in keeping the Muggleborns safe would be strictly minimal. Instead, he made the rounds of the places they had set up almost every day. They wanted assurance... the Muggle parents of students needed to be told that yes, once everything was over, they would have their jobs back... the younger ones wanted to know if they could just forget the Restriction of Underage Sorcery...

I am not cut out to be a politician, Harry thought grimly. Dennis and Colin Creevey, Dean Thomas, and Justin Finch-Fletchley had taken it upon themselves to practice dueling. And now they were encouraging others to duel. And since somehow the majority of the Healers had ended up bunking at Neville's place and they needed to be spread around more. One particularly fierce twelve-year old girl had broken her arm, and her parents had demanded a Healer handy in case of other such accidents.

"You'd think that they'd be happier to be safe," Ginny said.

"Buggers," Ron threw himself down in a chair. His face was wan and tired. "You'd think they'd be a bit more grateful that we've gotten them to safety. Did you hear that one witch actually cursed another over a *frying pan*?"

"Was that about a frying pan?" Harry said wearily. "I thought it was about a shoe..."

"No, there was an argument about a shoe," Ginny said. "I remember because Mum threatened to hex the witch who stole it, and then to hex the witch who raised a huge stink about it in the first place."

Something struck Harry as slightly odd. They had Apparated into Godric's Hollow only moments before. Usually their arrival was met with thundering feet, loud greetings, and everything else that involved living with loads of people, and having visitors at all hours. But there was only silence. The entire house was empty.

“Where is everyone?” Ron asked. By “everyone” he meant “Hermione.”

“She’s probably over at Grimmauld Place,” Harry said. He was already striding over to the fireplace. “Grimmauld Place!” he shouted.

“Oh! Thank goodness!” Hermione said loudly. She looked quite nervous. “I thought you’d come here first, but I suppose you didn’t, did you? They’ve all gone – some dementors and Death Eaters attacked Hogsmeade – and they should be back... when we got the word, it didn’t seem like there were that many—”

Ron, who had arrived during her diatribe, took her by the shoulders and gave her a gentle shake. “Breathe, Hermione,” he ordered. “What’s going on?”

“Well,” two bright spots of red appeared in her cheeks. “We got the word... it must have been two hours ago? Death Eaters and dementors attacked Hogsmeade—”

“But why?” Harry asked, puzzled.

“I don’t know,” Hermione shrugged. “Boredom? Attempting to draw us out?”

“Who went?” Ginny asked.

“Moody did,” Hermione said. Ron’s presence had her much calmer (ironic, as he usually had the opposite effect on her. “And Percy and George. Yes, Harry, they’re using Polyjuice. Everyone else is sort of scattered... I’m just getting a little worried, though, because they aren’t back yet.”

“Let’s go,” Harry said grimly. Suddenly it did not matter that he ached from exhaustion. He strode over to the ever-present cauldron of Polyjuice Potion and—

CRACK! CRACK!

Percy and George – who were already starting to turn back into themselves – appeared in the kitchen. Harry eyed them critically.

Neither appeared to be hurt; neither was sporting the grim, deadened look that would tell Harry that someone had died.

“What happened?” Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione chorused.

George winced, and indicated his ears.

“He got hit with a Deafening Hex,” Percy said in a voice so low that Harry had to lean forward to hear him. “It’s made his ears very sensitive. Go sit in a quiet room, George, I’ll let everyone know what happened.”

George nodded, and made a beeline for the door.

“There were a bit more than twenty Death Eaters,” Percy said immediately, once his impaired brother had left the room. “And loads of dementors. The real problem, though, was that some of the giants showed up.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” Ginny said.

“From what I could hear,” Percy said. “There was a rumor that you were in Hogsmeade, Harry.”

Harry sighed heavily. This was not a new circumstance. Arthur said that several owls came in a day that Harry had been seen by this witch or that wizard, in Surrey or Devonshire, or shopping in Diagon Alley. This was the first time, however, that Voldemort had retaliated so strongly.

“—was brilliant, though,” Percy said. “He actually climbed *up* the giant and made it explode. A Death Eater hit him with the hex right as he came down.”

“You and George took down that many Death Eaters, giants, and dementors?” Ron said, awed. Percy turned bright red.

“Moody was there,” Percy said. “And others were fighting too. I actually thought some of them were you guys under Polyjuice, but I suppose not. Must’ve been shop owners or residents who don’t particularly care for the way Voldemort is running things. Moody

should be back soon... last I saw him, he was chasing a pair of Death Eaters."

Harry nodded. He wished that he'd been at Headquarters when Percy and George had received the message. He would not have minded dueling Death Eaters... he would rather be placed in a life or death situation than listen to people, who had probably been perfectly reasonable just a month ago, bitch and moan about stupid little things.

"You're lucky," said Ron, who appeared to be thinking along the same lines as Harry. "We spent the day with people who don't know how effing lucky they are that Mum thought up a way to keep them from the Muggleborn Registration Commission."

CRACK!

Luna Apparated into the room, and her appearance made icy fear flood Harry's belly. Her robes were torn and spattered with dirt and grime. Her blue eyes were huge in her face, and her mouth was contorted into a horrible grimace. "Harry—" she gasped out. All airiness, all frivolity was gone, and Harry was forcibly reminded of when she turned Umbridge to stone, and cast the curse that killed her.

"You can't go to St. Mungo's," Luna said. "There's a trap. The Death Eaters..."

"What?" Harry said blankly. "What trap, Luna? Why would I need to go to St. Mungo's?"

She swayed a little on her feet. "Harry... they hurt Moody. And they... they set a trap."

"What do you mean, they hurt Moody?" Ginny asked sharply. "And what were you doing there in the first place?"

Luna's lips trembled. "They used the Cruciatus Curse on him. He wasn't... responsive. He didn't move, he was just staring."

Hermione made a small sound, like a wounded animal. Harry found that he couldn't quite breathe. *Cruciatus Curse... unresponsive...*

There was no need for anyone to spell it out to realize what that meant. "And they took him to St. Mungo's," Harry said in a flat voice.

Luna nodded, and Ron let out a string of foul curse words. Harry felt like joining him. He looked down at his hands and they shook. "That was an hour ago," she said. Tears were now streaming down her face. "I only just heard, I swear. Some of them were... talking about it. So I... questioned them before they – died."

"Is there a way to get around the trap?" Harry asked. His voice sounded very far away. He desperately did not want to leave a hurt and vulnerable Moody in St. Mungo's. The idea was repugnant to him. But Voldemort would not set a trap that would be easily maneuvered around. He wanted Harry, and would stop at nothing to get him. *Soon enough*, Harry thought grimly.

"Certainly not tonight," Luna said. Harry had no choice but to believe her. Luna believed everything. If she did not believe that they could rescue Moody, then they could not.

Harry punched the wall with such force that it felt like he'd broken a few bones.

"I just don't want to tell Neville," Luna said. Tears streamed unchecked down her cheeks. "I can't. I can't tell him."

"Was he there?" Ron asked after a long pause. Harry got the feeling that he only spoke because the silence made him uncomfortable.

Luna nodded. "We heard about Hogsmeade from Sirius... so we both swallowed some Polyjuice and went to help."

"It's lucky—" Percy began. But he was cut off by the appearance of Neville's Patronus. It formed in mid-air, right in front of Harry. It seemed to stare at him for a moment, and it glowed with strength that Harry had not yet seen Neville's Patronus achieve.

Then it spoke with Neville's voice, and the bottom of Harry's stomach fell away.

"Trap at St. Mungo's. Don't come, we're already gone. Don't blame yourself. I have no regrets. Tell Ron, Ginny, Hermione, and Luna – if they aren't there – that you have been the best friends I could ever have... I have no regrets."

"No," Harry breathed. His chest hurt. *Neville thinks he's about to die*, he thought, shocked. *He thinks he can't be saved*. Harry felt very slow and stupid. Luna crumpled to the floor, and it took a moment for it to register that she had started to scream. It was a horrible sound that twisted Harry's insides. Ginny knelt beside her.

Harry stared, almost uncomprehending, at Ron. *Neville's at St. Mungo's. He thinks he's about to die*.

He had his wand out, and was about to Apparate away, to try to save Neville when Luna shouted. "Harry, NO! THE TRAP!" But Harry did not care about the trap. He could circumvent it. Neville needn't die... not again...

Someone shouted something, and Harry's world went dark.

"--didn't know he'd be out of this long."

Luna's voice.

Neville.

Harry wanted to sink back into the oblivion. He did not want to have to remember just yet that Neville was gone. *Again*. He was dead. *Again*. Harry had not been able to save him. *Again*. Harry did not know when he had made the decision that enough was enough, only that sometime in between the arrival of Neville's Patronus, and Harry's awakening, he had decided not to procrastinate. It was time to take Voldemort out of the world.

"No more," Harry said. His voice was raspy. "I've got to end this."

"I knew he was going to say that," Hermione said sadly. She sounded as though she had been crying for hours. Harry blinked his eyes open. Judging by the quality of the night, she probably had.

"I'm serious," Harry said. "We'll get Rodolphus tomorrow and--"

"Rodolphus disappeared today," Ron said quietly. He had his head in his hands. It appeared as though Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, and Luna were alone. No other Weasleys were in the room. "We're hoping he wasn't killed at Hogsmeade... everyone in the Order knew that he wasn't to be touched, but there were shop owners and residents fighting today."

"Fuck that," Harry said viciously. "I'll fucking tear Gringotts apart if I have to. But I'm not letting another week go by."

"Harry--" Hermione began, but stopped once Harry shook his head violently.

"I think..." Luna said faintly. "I think you ought to go to the Ministry of Magic. There's a room there. In the Department of Mysteries."

"Why?" Harry said flatly. He suspected that Merlin had told her to tell him this. He knew which room she was talking about. It was where the Unspeakables studied love, and Harry had thought, in the last month, that his path might lead there. But now it seemed like a silly, stupid waste of time.

"I don't know," Luna said helplessly. Her hands made a fluttering motion. "What if the Holy Grail is there?"

Harry was about to refuse. He no more believed in the Holy Grail than he believed that Neville would come walking through those doors. It was pointless. He was surely going to follow Neville, and it would be sooner, rather than later--

"You're going," Ginny said fiercely. "Don't you dare forget your promise to me, Harry Potter. We're going."

Harry could not bring himself to argue with her, not now. So instead, he pulled her close. "Fine. We'll go tomorrow. But then--"

"--then we get Voldemort," Ron said.

Harry wondered if any of them believed in the Holy Grail.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry had paid more unauthorized visits to the Ministry of Magic than he had authorized ones. As he slipped quietly down the corridor toward the Department of Mysteries, Ginny a silent ghost at his side, he thought about what this meant. For both of his lives, he'd been required to do things such as this. Authority in the form of government had never been there for him—

Neville is dead—

And because of that, he'd always had to do things like break into the Ministry of Magic, or Gringotts, or Hogwarts. *It's like Dumbledore's speech*, Harry thought. *The Ministry was set up to be a support to the witches and wizards in Britain. And look how easily Voldemort took over. Probably didn't even need much coercion*, he thought darkly.

Moody is also dead. They both burned—

Maybe if Godric Gryffindor was still alive. Maybe if there were more witches and wizards like Dumbledore. Harry clung to thoughts that had nothing to do with Moody and Neville with everything that he had. But it kept intruding, the knowledge that they were gone. When he closed his eyes, he could see flames. Even though he had not been there, he still saw it. He'd seen Hermione burned alive once upon a separate time... it did not stretch his imagination too much to imagine Neville...

Stop, he told himself forcefully. The corridor seemed to stretch out before him. He could see the door, but it seemed to take him a minute to take one step.

Ginny squeezed his hand. He looked around at her. There was a fierce look on her face, as though she knew what he was thinking. But of course she knew what he was thinking. The only reason why she had not yet repeated that it was not his fault was because they had to be absolutely silent. Neither of them wanted to be caught in the bowels of the Ministry of Magic.

But Harry knew, *he knew*, that he was partly to blame for Neville's and Moody's deaths. He could have ended this. It could be over

already. They would be picking up the pieces of the world rent apart by Voldemort, but they would be safe. And now Rodolphus Lestrange had disappeared, and how the *hell* were they going to get into Gringott's without him?

That was, however, tomorrow's problem. Tonight was one last desperate attempt to find the magic that would enable Harry's survival. He looked down at Ginny again, and realized with a start that she was opening the door that led to the circular room. There were so many reasons why this little expedition was a bad idea, and there was only the slimmest of chances that they would find what they were looking for. They might not even be able to find a way to get in the room... and Ginny would probably feel even worse than she did now. If they never entered, she may feel certain that what was kept behind the always locked door would have saved him. And if they *did* manage to breach the protective charms, and there was nothing there...

Harry walked into Ginny.

"Gin—"

She shushed him and pointed. He looked around and saw two torches floating in the air to the sides of an open door. Harry knew without having to even think about it that it led to where the Unspeakables studied love, and the nature of that terrible power. A warm light spilled out; Harry stared at it for a moment, confused... the light seemed wrong, somehow.

"It's dancing," Ginny whispered. Harry's eyes widened. Tendrils of light waved and danced on the floor, acting more like shadows, or wildflowers swaying in the breeze, than light. It seemed almost a living thing...

Harry stepped closer, his wand drawn. Ginny closed the door behind them and without hesitating for even a moment she stepped across the threshold and into the living light. He felt a surge of wariness — *why is this open for us? What the hell?* — but it was immediately muffled, as if he had a thick, woolen jumper around the cautious part of him. He could feel it screaming at him that he was a moron, that it could be a trap, that Ginny might—

“Voldemort would *never* come in this room,” Ginny said.

It was smaller in size than the room with the Veil, the Death Chamber, but it was fashioned in much the same way. It sloped downward toward the middle. There were clusters of two or three stairs, and benches surrounded the center of the room on each of the landings, so the Unspeakables could observe—

Harry’s eyes found the source of the light, and his breath caught in the back of his throat. The rune that meant love blazed in the center of the room like a small sun, and nearly as impossible to look at. His hand came up automatically to shield his eyes, and almost without his own consent, his feet carried him down the stairs. Ginny was right beside him and he knew without having to look that she was just as enthralled as he was.

The closer they came to the rune, the more Harry felt this terrific pressure in his chest, as if he were thirty feet below the waves. It didn’t hurt, not really. But power seemed to echo in his ears, and he was short of breath. Without thinking and without worrying, he pocketed his wand. One hand gripped Ginny’s, and he needed the other to touch the rune...

They both stopped suddenly at the last stair. Harry could feel a barrier before them, and for the first time since entering the room he felt a hint of trepidation. He had that feeling that something important was about to happen, something that would shake up his world. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

The rune looked alive. It moved and spun and danced in the air of its own accord. Harry literally could not look away, and he knew that his mouth hung open, but he did not care. He did not know how long he stood there. It could have been minutes or hours... possibly even seconds... but Ginny reached out with her hand and stepped forward. And he followed her. He heard a strange sound the moment before he did, but he put it out of his mind... he could worry about why someone had used a charm at this exact moment later...

Harry fell to his knees.

He was swept up in a current of something completely unlike anything he had ever felt before. It was like a river of phoenix song that enfolded him, encompassed him, and took over his every sense. His hand fell limply to his side, and he stared at the rune without blinking. It shifted and changed and whispered to him, and a very, very dim part of him would have thought that he had gone crazy, but the vast majority of him finally, *finally* understood why Dumbledore had once called love the most terrible and wonderful and powerful force in the universe.

He saw his entire life laid bare. The light of the rune coalesced and changed until he saw a red-haired woman sitting propped up in a bed, holding a very small baby in her arms. The father was as close to the two of them as he could get without actually being in the bed with them. Harry was at once watching the scene, and was the baby. He felt warm and small and secure.

"We'll have to tell Sirius and the others," James said softly.

"You know what Sirius will say once he hears the name," Lily tried to laugh, but it came out as a watery little chuckle. "I'm your best mate, James! Why'd you name Hairy – get it, Harry Hairy – after Moony?"

James laughed, and both the baby Harry and the Harry that watched felt a warmth in his belly at the sound. *Dad.*

"Welcome to the world, little one," said Lily.

The scene shifted, but Harry never wanted to leave what must have been the event of his birth. The love his parents had felt for him had been like a physical presence in the room, and he didn't want to leave... but he was swept away to another scene with his parents. But this time, they did not whisper loving words to him. They died for him, and Harry was powerless to stop himself from watching. He felt his hands tingle with energy the moment his mother had made the choice that had set Harry's life course...

But it was all right. Because whatever he was experiencing – a memory or a vision or whatever – that physical presence of love stayed with him, even as Harry lay alone in the cold night air of the exploded house, he could feel it wrapped around him. Sirius came

then; Sirius, who just barely showed the beginnings of being haunted... he held Harry in his arms, and they cried together.

Harry was whirled from scene to scene. He both lived them and watched them, and he gradually began to understand that he did not possess the ability to grasp the totality of this force. It was a constant. It was always there with him, growing and changing with every stage of his life. Harry watched, overwhelmed, as his friendship with Ron and Hermione grew his very first year at Hogwarts. The kind of friendship that couldn't be broken by jealousy, childish temper tantrums, or any of the hardships that evil tossed their way.

It was like... some sort of journey, Harry realized. A sudden image of the King's Cross station – though white and shining and empty of people – sprung into his head, and he felt himself on the verge of a discovery... but it slipped away before it could be fully formed.

He watched and experienced anew each loss, each victory, and felt stunned, as though he had been struck by lightning, at how very much this terrible force called love had urged him to take actions. He watched as he attempted to rescue Sirius from the Department of Mysteries... saw how his love for his godfather had been manipulated... *It wasn't my fault*, Harry realized with an awe that nearly felled him. *I could no more have stayed behind at Hogwarts than I could have stopped loving him...*

Everywhere he turned, Harry was confronted with that implacable force.

It was not until he watched himself at Azkaban that he was jolted into awareness. A small part of him watched with confusion. *What has this got to do with love?* They had been cruel that day, no matter that Harry still believed that those deaths had been necessary. It was the manner that it had been done... But love had driven him then, just as much as it had when he had attempted to kill himself when he had thought that he had lost everyone. It burned in Harry's soul...

He wanted to turn his face away, but he did not want to stop this vision. Knowledge was growing inside him, and he was so close to articulating it, to really understanding—

It was sealed when he watched his drunken self fling memories into a Pensieve. Those memories had been specifically put in there to hurt the family he had adopted into his heart. Harry gaped at what he was seeing... *families don't do that to each other*, Harry thought. That internal voice sounded very much like Neville. And for the first time since he had been kicked out of the Burrow, since Arthur had rebuffed him in the shed, Harry let go of the hurt that had allowed him to mistake love for pain. He had been arrogant to think that his actions had changed who the Weasleys were at heart. They were his Weasleys... they'd always been his Weasleys...

Harry covered his eyes and the visions faded away. He was surprised to find that his cheeks were wet; he had cried, and had not been aware of it. *So much was done in love... the good and the bad... that's why Voldemort is more dangerous than any man alive... he is impervious to that influence that drives the rest of us to the heights and the depths*. But Voldemort was a barren, cruel landscape, where love withered and died...

"Harry," said Ginny.

He turned his head and looked at her. That fierce, blazing look on her face... she had never looked more beautiful. He remembered the delight of realizing that he had begun to love her far sooner than he had realized.

"Ginny," said Harry. And he reached over and kissed her. He did not bother to cast a Disillusionment Charm, a Silencing Charm, or anything of the like. He undressed her and eyed her with a hunger that came as much from his heart and soul as it did his body. She watched him the same way he watched her... her eyes were very bright, and she appeared to glow. Rationally, Harry knew that it came from the rune and not from Ginny... but as he slid inside her, she grew even more luminous, and he had to close his eyes when she flew apart, it dazzled him so.

As he put his robes back on, Harry could not keep his eyes off of her.

"Always and always," he said. His voice shook.

"I had no idea that always and always could mean so much," Ginny said in a thick voice. "No idea."

Harry just shook his head. The moment they stepped up onto the first stair, reality stepped back in. He'd been dazzled, and now his thoughts were trickling back, and he became aware that they were not alone. It wasn't possible that they were alone. The door had been open... he had heard the charm...

"Merlin?" he said tentatively.

"Present," said Merlin.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence when Harry realized that he and Ginny had just been very intimate. He glanced down at the middle of the room. He had just made love to Ginny in a spotlight. Ginny's face was as red as a sunset, and Harry fervently hoped—

"I – er – you know," said Merlin. "Once the – uh... robes. Well... when they started coming off..."

"Thanks," Ginny whispered, mortified. "We were a bit... caught up in the moment."

Harry shuffled his feet. Ginny shuffled her feet. Merlin shuffled his feet. At least, Harry suspected that Merlin shuffled his feet. But Merlin was invisible, of course, so it was nearly impossible to tell. "I appreciate it," Harry said finally, once the silence had become too awkward. "We don't usually—"

"No need for thanks!" Merlin said in a strangled voice. "Or... to tell me anything. I've – uh – I thought something like this might happen. I was warned... no matter."

As the bliss of that moment began to seep away, and Harry found his curious side rearing its head. Here was Merlin, in the flesh, and Harry had time to question him. Questions and concerns were rapidly tangling up in his head. *Who is he? Why is he here? What is his motive? How did he know to come here?* And he felt a brief stirring of anger. Slowly, it began to bloom. *Why the ruse? Why did he let—*

"I know what you must be thinking," said Merlin. He sounded fretful and anxious. His voice had gotten deeper. "And I tried to stop it. I couldn't make him listen to me. I just... I couldn't."

Harry felt the breath leave his lungs. He had wondered, of course, immediately after Neville and Moody had died... why hadn't Merlin stopped it? It was a little disconcerting that Merlin had tried and failed. "You did... you did what you could?"

"I did," said Merlin. "There's only so much I can do, though." He did not sound pleased that this was so. Harry felt disoriented, and had never wanted to know more who Merlin was. The anonymity of their fellow time traveler—

"Merlin," Ginny said musingly.

"Er..."

"Why the different names?" Harry asked, before he could stop himself. *Who knows how long before he'll scarper? And you ask him why the names?*

"Oh..." Merlin said. "I think that might've been Luna. Or her dad. Although I might've come up with it because of them..."

What the hell?

"Sorry," said Merlin, as if he knew that he had sounded less than sane, and was now making an effort for Harry's and Ginny's sake. "It was Luna. I remember now. Sometimes I forget things," he added vaguely.

Harry exchanged a glance with Ginny. He was not entirely certain that he felt comfortable with the fact that someone who admitted to being forgetful was toying with their lives. It had taken years of preparation for Harry, Ginny, and Ron to get this far, and look how fragile all that planning had been. Granted, he didn't have the benefit of knowledge of the future, but from where he was standing—

"Don't look at me like that," Merlin said defensively. "I know what I'm doing."

“These are our lives—“

“It’s my life, too,” Merlin interrupted firmly. Harry thought Merlin might be standing with his arms folded across his chest. Harry heard him inhale, and there was the sound of an aborted attempt to speak. “Sorry. You wouldn’t – you can’t—“

“Who are you?” Ginny asked bluntly.

“Can’t tell you,” Merlin replied immediately. “Listen... the less you know about me the better.” He paused. “I will tell you that I’m not Dobby.”

Dobby? What the hell?

“But—“

“No buts,” said Merlin. “It might seriously fu – I mean, screw – things up.”

“Will... will they ever know who you are?” Harry asked. He had the sudden desire that they were meeting anywhere but here. His curiosity kept slipping out of his fingers... there was so much to ask, but he still felt to pressure of the rune, and it was difficult to concentrate.

Merlin was silent for a very long time. Harry waited... apparently having a larger measure of patience was another result of skimming the surface of the most terrible force in the universe. Ginny was unnaturally still and silent at his side. Her wand was out, but she held it loosely at her side. Harry’s was still in his pocket. He almost resented the fact that he couldn’t really bring himself to distrust this man. Although he supposed that if Merlin were using the Trojan Horse method, he might be a woman in a man’s body, with a man’s voice.

“Did you find what you were looking for here tonight?” Merlin asked finally.

He had not. There had been no Holy Grail in this room... no magical way of survival kept hidden by the Unspeakables who studied love.

But he had discovered that the fact that this was his destiny was as much a gift as it was a curse. Just as vengeance was the darkest facet of love, sacrifice was the brightest. And the fact that Harry knew now beyond a shadow of a doubt that he had the strength to do what must be done... it filled him with pride. "Yeah," he said. "I didn't know I was looking for it. But I found it anyway."

"Me too," Merlin murmured.

"I did too," Ginny said. Harry could only see her profile (she was gazing in the direction of Merlin's voice), but she appeared resolute.

"I was afraid," Harry said in a low voice. "I started to think that maybe I wasn't going to be able to do it. You know... you know about the Horcrux inside me, don't you?" It felt easier, mentioning it to Merlin. Just as the anonymity of him had made him uncomfortable just a few minutes previously, it made it infinitely easier to discuss this with a faceless man.

Merlin paused again. "I do."

"I just... I didn't know how I'd be able to," Harry said. "I waited and waited for another solution. Hermione looked *everywhere* for it. But maybe... I've been hit with the Killing Curse twice now. And a chance like the Deathly Hallows – something like that can't happen every day. Or twice a lifetime. And now... I wonder whether this was the way it was supposed to happen."

The words were spilling out of him. He felt calm and purposeful. "I mean... what if we were always supposed to come back? And the Deathly Hallows was what saved me so that everyone else – except... except Neville and Moody – could live here, in this timeline," he felt pressure in his chest, and wondered if the rune was gripping him again. "And it's worth it. It's so worth it. It's a choice... but it's the easiest choice in the world... I knew that. I've known it all along. I just forgot for a little while."

Ginny was gripping his hand so hard that he feared he might hear the bones crunch. He looked into her eyes and he knew that she understood him perfectly. She would not try to stop him. She knew

him as well as he knew himself, and he would not be the man she loved if he refused this task.

Merlin drew in a deep, shuddering breath. There was a whisper of movement, and something heavy and made of metal clanged to the floor. Harry's brain, overwhelmed as it was, did not process what he was seeing. "It's a little crispy," said Merlin. "I couldn't resist the urge to destroy it myself. Sorry."

Hufflepuff's cup. It was battered and charred and cracked right down the middle, but it was undoubtedly the same cup that he, Ron, and Hermione had liberated from Gringott's so long ago. Harry gaped at it, almost unable to comprehend what he was seeing. A Horcrux, destroyed. The same Horcrux that he had dreaded acquiring again, because it had seemed that pulling off a second bank heist would be nigh impossible. And there it was, at his feet.

He couldn't help it. He started to laugh. And Ginny joined in, and then Merlin, until the room rang with laughter. "Don't," he said, gasping, "apologize for destroying a Horcrux."

"All right," Merlin said. "But I forgot if someone called it or not..."

Harry picked up the Horcrux, placed it in the pocket of his robes, and felt a strange regret that the conversation was drawing to a close. His curious side was still strangely muffled. All the times he had imagined a conversation with Merlin... he had never expected to leave so many questions unanswered. Why did he take the Invisibility Cloak? Why did Luna know about him, and why were the rest kept in the dark? What were his secrets?

But Harry did not ask any of these questions. Instead, he asked, "Will I see you again? Before the end?"

"It's a possibility," said Merlin.

Harry held out his hand. Merlin ignored it, and Harry felt arms wrap around him in a hug. After a moment's hesitation, Harry returned it, though it looked quite odd to be hugging someone invisible.

“Listen,” Merlin said. “Give me five minutes to get out of here before you leave this room. I need a head start.”

Chapter 43 – Sacrifice

Awareness came back to Harry slowly. As soon as he stepped out of the room, he felt stunned and disoriented, as if he had just drunk an entire bottle of wine by himself. As they had promised, they had given Merlin a head start. And when Harry and Ginny exited the Department of Mysteries, he began to feel indignant. *How could I just let him leave?* He asked himself, appalled.

Ginny appeared as flabbergasted and bewildered as he felt. So stunned was he that he opened his mouth several times to speak before remembering that he was at the Ministry of Magic in the dead of night, and it would probably be for the best if he did not speak. The Horcrux was heavy in his palm, and because he couldn't talk out loud, he argued fiercely with himself.

How could I just trust him like that?

You didn't have much of a choice. And he didn't hurt you, did he?

But he could have—

He didn't.

He also didn't tell me anything.

Maybe he had his reasons—

He stole the Cloak!

An ephemeral thought flitted through his mind so quickly that he nearly grasped something important, but then it was lost again. *I hate it when that happens*, Harry thought sullenly. He poked and prodded his emotions and realized that he was only annoyed because his curiosity had not been satisfied. He trusted Merlin—

Sort of. I don't think he's a Death Eater or anything.

You're a moron. He got the Horcrux!

Fine, Harry thought sulkily. *But I wish I knew who he is.*

His internal argument kept him company back to the point from which they could Apparate back to Godric's Hollow. Ginny grasped his hand tightly, spun on the spot, and they vanished together with a loud *CRACK!* Harry opened his eyes a moment after, to find Ron and Hermione, sitting very close to one another on an armchair.

The other two looked up, and Harry saw that they were afraid to hear the news. *It seems like so long ago that kind of despair*, he thought, filled with wonder. But the rune had washed the despair away like a cleansing rain, leaving behind a sense of purpose and love. It was like the best parts of Harry had been illuminated, and the knowledge that he could do this with his head held high was priceless beyond measure.

"Did you—"

"No," Ginny's voice was strong.

Hermione abruptly stood up and walked out of the room without speaking another word. Harry watched her go. He knew the words that would comfort her, but he did not think that he ought to be the one to tell her. He had seen a glimpse of her face, and he knew that any words coming from him would only make her anguish worse.

"I'll go," Ginny said. "I'll tell her what I saw, what I felt."

Harry nodded. He threw himself down on the sofa, and stretched out his legs. A part of him still marveled at the peace he felt. *Thank you, Luna*, he said fervently. *Thank you. Thank you. And thank you, Merlin, since you probably told her to tell us to go there.*

"So..."

Ron's voice cut into his thoughts. Harry blinked.

"There's nothing?" Ron asked. His voice was raspy. He sounded like an old man. "There's nothing you can do?"

"No," Harry said gently. His vision doubled, and he remembered the scenes that had passed before his eyes. Ron had figured into a great many of him: brave, loyal Ron who had a very large heart, even when he didn't know it. He chuckled softly.

"You think it's funny?" Ron asked incredulously. Harry saw that his eyes were wet.

"Not that, no," Harry admitted. "But I think that love room turned me into a girl."

"What?" Ron said blankly.

"It – er – helped me understand a lot about love," Harry said. He ruffled his hair nervously. He and Ron talked about loads of things, but they'd never been much for sharing feelings. "Not to sound like Dumbledore, but when I was confronted with how many decisions I've made because of love – and not just the big stuff, but the little things – I've got to agree that it's the most powerful force in the universe."

Ron's brows scrunched together, but he didn't say anything.

Harry didn't say anything for a long moment. *Is that why Merlin wanted me to go into that room? Will it help me do what has to be done? Did I keep trying to find another solution, and fall into something dark?* His belly flooded with ice at the thought, but he realized now how much despair he had felt. It was like having a lamp turned on in a room in which his eyes had gotten used to near total darkness. *And I might have even justified it,* Harry thought guiltily. *Because I didn't want to leave Ginny.* Oh, he was certain that he would not have made a Horcrux, but he was unable to judge now how far he would have gone to survive.

"It's a blessing," Harry said suddenly. "Voldemort can be beaten."

"Don't you dare," Ron said. He glared at Harry. "If you say that it's an easy solution, I'll punch you."

"It isn't an easy solution," Harry said. "It's worth it, though, Ron. And if you were me, you'd feel exactly the same way."

"I don't know if I could do it," Ron said. He had his head in his hands again. "I just don't know. I'm... selfish," his voice was muffled, and Harry had to lean forward to hear him. "I'm not like you, Harry."

"Can you imagine if we were exactly the same person?" Harry asked dryly. "Hermione wouldn't have survived our moods."

Ron snorted.

Harry squirmed and grimaced, feeling immensely uncomfortable. "Listen... I think you could do it. You just... don't have to. And I'm really grateful for that," Harry took a deep breath. He wished these types of things could just be understood, and that Harry did not have to speak these words. "Er – Ron? We've, you know, been friends for a while—"

"I'm not going to date you, Harry," Ron chuckled. But it sounded a bit forced. He obviously sensed an emotional moment in the offing. He looked up, and when Harry met the eyes of his best mate, he felt a great bloody lump in his throat. *Damn, this is just going to make it worse.*

"I'm glad it was you," Harry said. He cleared his throat, but the lump persisted. And now tears were stinging the backs of his eyes. *Great. Just great.* "You know. If I could've chosen any bloke to come back in time with me... I wouldn't have even had to think about it. I couldn't – if you hadn't been here – I really don't think I would have made it this far."

They stood up and moved forward into a hug at exactly the same moment. Ron slapped him on the back with enough force that Harry thought he might bruise, and he squeezed tightly enough that he thought he might have heard one of Ron's ribs crack.

"I think maybe you were right," Ron said. "I think maybe that room did turn you into a girl."

They both laughed. Ron pretended not to notice that a few tears squeezed out of Harry's eyes (even though he tried his best to hold it in), and Harry did the same when Ron had to turn around and swipe at his face.

"Will you do me a favor?" Harry asked quietly.

"Of course," Ron said. Harry could hear the "Anything" tacked on, though Ron didn't say it.

"I've got something to do," Harry said. "I want to be with Ginny... and I need to make something." He did not know what he had planned until the words were out of his mouth, but he wanted to make absolutely certain that they would be all right. He did not want Voldemort to be allowed to hurt them. "My part is at the beginning... and I don't really want to plan the battle, or tell people what to do, or anything like that."

"Plus, I'm the master strategist," Ron said modestly. He tried to smile, but it kept slipping off his face. "Of course, Harry."

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Three days passed in a flurry of activity in which Harry did not take part. He stayed in Godric's Hollow with Ginny; he was doing his best to offer those he loved one last measure of protection. Ron must have warned everyone that Harry had things to do (Harry suspected that Ron had alluded to the terrible power), and no one questioned his absence in the planning.

He spent the evenings with the Weasleys, Remus, Tonks, Dumbledore, and anyone else who could join them. They did not speak about the final battle, and Harry's feeling of clarity and peace did not diminish, but was strengthened. He thought that might have something to do with the runes that he had been making for those he loved.

His mother had invoked ancient magic when she had sacrificed herself for Harry. Harry wanted his own sacrifice to be the same. But because he did not want to take any chances, and because he thought it might work, he asked Sirius if he could melt down the silver goblets (Sirius had given him his whole-hearted approval), and he set about making talismans.

It was late afternoon on the day before they were to draw Voldemort into battle (Harry could not avoid hearing *some* things), and Harry

was nearly done with his project. He set aside the talisman that he had made for Ron, pulled a clump of silver toward him. And then stared.

He'd thought that it would be the same for each person. Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Luna, Dumbledore, Percy, Fred, George, and all the rest. He didn't think that each would be so highly individual, and as that awareness grew, he had held off making the last four. "Ron's is done," he said gruffly.

Ginny reached over and rubbed his neck with gentle hands. "Which one will you make next?" she asked softly.

"Your mum's, I think," Harry said. "I'm saving yours for last."

Harry had been surprised to realize that he was actually capable of very complex emotions. He'd thought that he loved everyone the same way (though he had to admit that he loved some people more than others), but he didn't. Creating the runes out of the silver forced him to plumb the depths of his own emotions (something he was not particularly comfortable with). They even looked different. Luna's, for example, looked fragile; the lines of the rune were thinner (though still strong), and appeared delicate. Dumbledore's was all exaggerated lines, and was larger than the others.

They were all different.

Molly Weasley, he thought. He raised his wand and began to carve. He did not even have to look at the etched rune in front of him. He knew the shape very well. He let his mind drift, as it always did when he made a talisman. He thought of her mothering, and how it had defined her for so long. *I sort of forgot that she was a person*, Harry thought, a bit guiltily. She was very fierce in protecting those she loved. A line of the rune took on the shape of a claw, and he couldn't help but smile. He continued on, and he realized that it was not so difficult after all, thinking about everything he loved about her. It didn't hurt; he still had the knowledge that she was his Molly Weasley...

"That's beautiful," Ginny breathed in his ear.

"You say that after every single one," Harry said.

"It's true, though," Ginny said stoutly. "It's... amazing to watch. Sometimes I can see something flash, and it's like I'm having another vision."

"I'm remembering what I saw," said Harry. He loved that she had not questioned what he was doing. She had not asked him if it was really necessary; she understood that he must do everything he can, and if that meant doing something that wasn't strictly necessary... it was necessary for Harry.

It was easier to make Arthur's talisman than it was to make Molly's. Harry thought it might have something to do with what had happened at Azkaban, but Harry felt he knew the older wizard better, and that he had a stronger grasp on who he was. And it made him laugh when Harry's appreciation of Arthur's childlike love of Muggles translated over to a line (the same line that appeared to be a claw in Molly's) looking like the blades of an old-fashioned lawn mower. As with the others, toward the end he closed his eyes, and let the memories take hold and guide his wand.

He wiped the sweat off his brow, and took a large gulp of water. Arthur's talisman appeared strong and clean; it looked the most like Ron's. He glanced down at the next clump of silver, and wondered what he would find there. It made him vastly uncomfortable. He did not want to probe his emotions in regards to Severus Snape. But he likewise could not leave him out.

He grimaced, and set to work.

It was every bit as draining as he expected. It did not truly surprise Harry that he loved (he grimaced just thinking about it) Snape. He'd known for a very long time that he respected both the old Snape and the new; he also admired the new Snape for his ability to overcome his bitterness. He thought of Snape's bravery in going to Voldemort again and again, keeping a secret inside his head that would get him killed in an instant. He thought of the fact that it had been Snape's love for Harry's mother that had led him to do this. He even put in his admiration of the fact that (in the last timeline) no matter how much Harry had impugned his name, Snape had kept the secret. He

snorted when he saw a line that looked very like a snake (in Ron's talisman, it had been a broomstick).

"I still can't get over the fact that they all look so different," Harry said. He laid Ron's and Snape's side by side, and he saw two completely different objects that were, nevertheless, exactly the same. He shook his head. "I'm deeper than I thought."

Ginny laughed. "It's almost time for dinner," she murmured in his ear. "We've got about half an hour. Do you have time to make mine?"

"No," Harry said. "But we have time for something else."

She circled around him and sat on his lap. "I was hoping you were going to say that. I think you might need a little reminder of how much you love me."

Harry unbuttoned her blouse, and slipped his hand inside. "Never," he said. "But I'm not going to say no to having it reinforced just a little..."

Everyone came to dinner that night. Harry suspected that Ron had issued a command, but he did not voice his suspicions. It felt too good to sit around a table full of giddy people and excellent food. He remembered these moments of camaraderie from last time. No one knew what tomorrow would bring (well, Harry knew what it would bring for him), and everyone was a bit punch drunk from the uncertainty.

His entire body felt light. He glanced around the table, and it struck him what a miracle it was that so many of them had survived to this point. There were only two empty places: Neville and Moody. The rest were there, faces alight with a mixture of terror and elation that the time to fight – really fight – was so close.

I don't want them to come back for me, Harry realized with a start. He knew that despite whatever she had seen at the Department of Mysteries, despite the fact that she knew that he had to do this, Ginny would be tempted to play with time again. Adding them into the mix with Merlin, who appeared to have the opposite goal, would likely be catastrophic.

But the last thing he wanted to do on the eve of his death was to start an argument with Ginny and Ron. Percy laughed at something Fred said, and Harry had an idea. If Harry told Percy to give them a message... they would listen to him. He hoped they would listen to him. If it came from anyone else... they might listen to Sirius, but Harry did not want to force his godfather to convince anyone to let James' son stay dead.

I'll write him a letter, Harry thought. After Ginny is asleep...

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Harry and Ginny were the last to arrive at Hogwarts the next day. It was late afternoon. The sun was steadily moving toward the mountains, and night was rapidly approaching. Harry felt almost light-headed with relief that he had not been expected to plan what would come next. Ron had done everything. Harry had only had to show up in the Great Hall.

"What the--?" Harry said, shocked, when he and Ginny entered.

It was filled with people, most of whom Harry did not know, or only recognized in passing. He saw the two women who had argued so fiercely about the frying pan – or it might have been a shoe – sitting next to each other at the table normally reserved for Slytherin. Amos and Cedric Diggory sat over at the Hufflepuff table, and several shopkeepers from Diagon Alley congregated around Fred and George.

"Turns out a lot of people wanted to help," Ron said. He shrugged nonchalantly, but Harry saw the pride in his eyes. Harry gave a lop-sided smile.

"Well done, General," he said. Ron tilted his head toward Hermione, and the chain he wore (upon which hung the talisman that Harry had made him) glinted in the light. "How many, d'you reckon?"

"More than a hundred," Ron said. "So we've modified our plans a little. Snape's telling Voldemort that twenty people showed up with us... we're hoping he'll bring his full force. Save us the work, you know, later."

Harry nodded. He was about to open his mouth and thank Ron when he found himself gripped tightly around the arm and dragged away. "Hey!" he said loudly.

Percy glared at him. "What the *hell* did you mean by that letter you shoved under my door?"

Harry had been hoping that he would not be confronted about this. Late the night before, after he had finished Ginny's rune and she had fallen asleep, he had agonized over what he wanted to tell Percy. He had finally simply written: "Tell Ginny and Ron not to come back for me."

"Just what it said," Harry said firmly.

"But—"

But Harry shook his head. "Listen, you're going to understand soon enough. Just... tell them, all right?"

Percy's mouth was set in a firm line, and he looked as though he would like nothing better than to beat Harry with a Bludger until he told Percy what he had meant by the note.

"Are all the students out?" Harry asked, hoping to divert his attention.

"Of course," he said stiffly. "Except for the ones of age that wish to fight."

Harry looked around and saw Ernie Macmillan standing around with Dean Thomas, Daphne Greengrass, and Anthony Goldstein. He suspected that quite a few members of Potter's Army had stayed behind. "No stragglers?" He pressed, just to be certain.

"No," Percy said. "We checked with the Marauder's Map that Sirius had. They're all gone. We sent them to the safe houses where all the Muggleborns were staying."

"Good," Harry said. He cast about for something to say – anything – when the sound of a very loud bell filled the room. Everyone immediately stopped talking, and everyone turned, almost as one,

toward the doors that led to the Entrance Hall. Harry did not need anyone to tell him what that sound meant. He had apparently arrived just in time.

Voldemort had arrived.

A small, warm hand slipped into his. People were talking – Harry heard Snape mention something about their plan working – and Sirius responded with a question. The Weasleys were issuing last minute instructions. Potter's Army was congregated near the Head Table; they appeared to be chanting something, though Harry's ears felt as though they'd been filled with cotton.

He looked around again, and his eyes found Molly and Arthur. He regretted that he had wasted this last year on a hurt that somehow seemed quite childish now. "Tell them I love them," he said.

"I'm pretty sure they'll figure it out," Ginny said. Her voice wobbled.

"Even so," Harry said.

They stared at each other for a few moments. Harry opened his mouth to tell her again just how much he loved her—

Voldemort's voice, magically amplified, washed over them like a cold wave. Everywhere around him, people's faces set in grim lines. Ron spat on the ground at his feet. All wands were drawn, though everyone knew not to attack until Ron gave the signal. It registered dimly on Harry that Ron's plan had worked. Voldemort had brought an army against what he thought was about thirty people.

"—give yourself up, Harry Potter," Voldemort said. "And I will spare what few friends you have left. You have twenty minutes to come to me. If you do not, everyone in that building will die. On your head be it."

Harry cleared his throat. He did not want their last memory of him to be of his voice shaking with fear. "That's my cue," he said in what he hoped was a light, casual tone. He saw face after incredulous face turn toward him.

“What do you mean, Harry?” Fred asked. Others echoed him, until the Hall rang with confusion.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What’s he talking about?”

“How does he expect—“

“Why is he—“

Harry’s eyes met Dumbledore’s. Dumbledore stood straight, though his face was lined with grief. He wore the talisman that Harry had made him over his robes, and it seemed to glow.

“Don’t worry,” Harry said. He tried to sound reassuring. “I’m going to unleash my terrible power.”

Harry turned and found himself engulfed in a tight hug from Sirius. His godfather didn’t say anything – Harry was not certain that Sirius could talk at this moment.

Those who knew and loved him respected his desire not to have to say goodbye. But Ginny, Ron, Hermione, and Luna followed him out of the Great Hall (where everyone was murmuring excitedly; Harry could hear Charlie speculating about what exactly the ‘terrible power’ was), and into the Entrance Hall.

None of them said anything. It was too big for words. Harry let his eyes linger on all of them. He wondered if he would exist enough to miss them.

“Harry,” Ginny said softly.

Harry kissed her. It was like the kisses they shared after they had lost everyone, when the only thing separating Harry from complete despair had been her and Ron. He tasted salty tears, and wondered if it was her crying, or if it was his tears. After what felt like only a second, Harry pulled away. Luna caught Ginny, and threw her arms around her, whispering in her ear.

Harry turned away.

The five steps that took him from just inside the Entrance Hall to right over the threshold were perhaps the hardest steps that he had ever taken. He kept his back straight. He did not look back; he did not want to see the look of fierce anticipation that must surely be written on the faces of those who did not know what he was about to do. He tapped himself with his own wand, and murmured the spell that would turn him invisible until just before he met Voldemort.

Voldemort was waiting. Harry wiped his sweaty hands on his robes. He paused and leaned against the wall of the castle. *I wish that he wasn't waiting for me right here, where everyone can see*, he thought a little desperately. Everyone who had chosen to fight the Death Eaters and Voldemort had a very good view. The light of the setting sun spread across Hogwarts, and Voldemort and his followers stood out in stark relief.

Harry took a few more steps, and then paused again. He stood in the middle. Before him were his enemies. Behind him were the people he loved far more than his own life. He had never felt more alone.

"I'm here."

It was Merlin, and it was as though he had read Harry's thoughts. "I can do this," Harry said fiercely, defensively. "I'm not going to back out, I'm going to do this. If that's why you're here—"

"Of course not," Merlin sounded surprised, shocked even. "You've always been able to do this."

"Then why are you here?" Harry asked. He sounded a bit desperate even to his own ears, and he was aware that he was drawing out the time, trying to solve this one last mystery. "If I can do this, if I didn't need you to – to"—he tried to think of the right words, his mind scrambling—"encourage events to play out the way they have... why are you even here?"

They had started walking again. Harry could feel Merlin at his side. He moved when Harry moved, and if Harry focused on their steps, he could almost forget what lay ahead. The silence stretched out for ten

steps – Harry counted – and it seemed like Merlin would withhold this information.

“I didn’t want you to be alone,” said Merlin. Harry knew by the thickness of Merlin’s voice that the other man was close to tears. Harry’s eyes were strangely dry. He walked forward several more steps, and Harry found that Merlin’s words had enabled him to lengthen his stride. Merlin followed pace. He squinted, and imagined he could see the red of Voldemort’s eyes.

“Are you wearing my cloak?” Harry asked. “You didn’t have to steal it, you know. The Resurrection Stone was destroyed long ago.”

“I didn’t know,” Merlin admitted after a long pause.

“Now you do,” Harry said.

Harry felt fingers brush against his arm, and then grip it tightly. “Listen,” Merlin said in a low, urgent voice. “I’m so sorry. I really am. Please forgive me?”

Harry did not know what to make of this apology. His thoughts were a confusing swirl as fully half his mind was occupied with the large cluster of Death Eaters, dementors, giants, and werewolves, and he could not devote his full attention to the strange conversation he was having. Merlin had come from the future, which must mean that he knew something that Harry could not know.

“I think you care about what’s going to happen in a few moments,” Harry said a bit recklessly. He was much more at ease sharing his feelings. He only had a few more minutes to feel uncomfortable, after all. “That makes it easier... knowing that you don’t like this. So... of course. There is no need to apologize.”

“I care very much,” Merlin said immediately.

Harry nodded, forgetting that Merlin could not see him. “I thought you might.” If Merlin did not care about Harry, why would he walk with him to lend him courage? He did not need to understand Merlin’s motivations to know that Harry walked beside a friend. And now that it was happening, it felt almost inevitable that Merlin be here, whoever

he may be. Harry and one person who loved him; Merlin could be almost anyone, yet his faceless nature made it almost as though everyone he loved stood with him...

Harry took another step forward. And then another. And then several more until he was very close. He could hear the Death Eaters talking loudly, and felt the chill of the dementors, who flanked the humans and giants and werewolves. He refused to let them affect him... he did not want his last moments to flee with him feeling an unnatural despair.

"Will you take the Disillusionment Charm off of me?" Harry asked in the barest of whispers. "I don't want to be tempted to use my wand."

"When you're ready," Merlin breathed.

Harry put his wand away, and took a few more steps forward. Voldemort was perhaps ten feet away. He was not speaking to his followers. He stared straight ahead; he seemed certain that Harry would show up. He understood that Harry would not allow his friends to die. He was right. His long, spidery fingers held his wand in a loose grip that pointed it up toward his chin. Harry's insides gave a twist.

Harry took another deep breath. "I'm ready."

Several things happened at once. Harry flickered back into visibility, and the followers of Tom Riddle immediately began to jeer and laugh at what they thought was his stupidity. Harry heard a furtive, wheezing sound, and saw Peter Pettigrew giggling. Voldemort was silent—

And almost at the same moment that Merlin took the Disillusionment Charm off of Harry, the clearing lit up with a faint, silvery light that seemed to warm Harry's body from the inside out. What seemed like hundreds of Patronuses congregated around Harry, though he knew that it could not possibly be that many. He took his eyes off of Voldemort and looked around in wonder. Dumbledore's phoenix winged by; Ron's terrier came to sit by Harry's feet. Mr. Weasley's weasel, Kingsley's lynx, Tonks' wolf, and countless other animals of all shapes and sizes, emblems of hope and joy, came to stand stationary near Harry.

Ginny's doe walked on delicate feet to stand so close to Harry that he could feel the warmth like a kiss. He leaned toward it, trying to get as close to her as he could, and finally looked back to his oldest enemy.

Voldemort's eyes were wide, and his lip was curled in a sneer of hatred and rage. "So much for your terrible power," Voldemort spat. He seemed disconcerted by the sheer number, and Harry could hear renewed murmurings from the Death Eaters. They sounded anxious. Wormtail scrambled backward, away from the light.

Harry said nothing.

"Your friends will let you die alone," Voldemort said. He sounded almost giddy. "Some friends!"

"I'm not alone," Harry said. He thought of Merlin and the Patronuses. His loved ones had his back, and he was the furthest thing from being alone. "And I'm lucky to have the type of friends that I do. I might've turned out like you, and then I really would've been alone. You're a waste of a man, Tom Riddle."

"But at least I am alive," Voldemort hissed.

Harry's legs felt very weak, but he kept his back straight and his head held high. Ginny's doe did not waver, but gave him the strength to do what he must. He wished that it was solid. He wished he could lean against it in truth.

"Avada Kedavra!"

And Harry's world went dark.

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Author's Note: *I don't really have anything to say, other than that I hope you have enjoyed this chapter. This was one of the very first scenes that I thought of when Backward With Purpose first walked into my head (practically fully formed), and I'm sitting here thinking*

how crazy and wonderful it is that I'm finally here, and I've now written these words.

It's a very heady feeling! So... tell me what you think about it. If you loved it, tell me. If you hated it, tell me.

(Also, the Ron scene is due directly to the story Learning to Fly, by Hgfan1111. Go read it!)

Chapter 44 – Interlude: Severus Snape

Severus Snape was not a sentimental man. He did not have many friends, and the only one who had ever really counted was Lily Potter, and he had lost that friendship because of one word that he could never quite bring himself to repeat. But when Lily Potter's son handed him a silver rune, he had to admit – begrudgingly, of course, and with no small amount of resentment – that he had come to care for the boy after all.

He wondered when he had stopped blaming Harry Potter for being the product of the union between the nemesis of his adolescence and the love of his life. He could not quite pinpoint the exact date (it might have been when Potter had saved his life in the graveyard, or possibly even before that); all he knew was that when Potter prepared to meet his death so that Voldemort could be vanquished, all resentment had slipped away and had been replaced with respect.

And, he admitted to himself with a scowl, *no small degree of fondness*. He glanced at Sirius Black out of the corner of his eye. In his weaker moments, Severus wondered how he could've hated someone who was quite similar to himself. Possibly because the both of them held grudges longer and fiercer than most others Severus had met. In his more pessimistic moments, Severus blamed himself for allowing what could only be called friendship to develop between the two. *Sirius Black*, he thought bleakly.

"Got your knickers in a twist, Snivellus?" Black asked. Severus hated the fact that he knew that Black only sparred with him to ease the ache at what was about to happen. He hated it even more that it helped.

"Once again, you show yourself to be completely incapable of depth beyond a centimeter," Severus said coldly.

Black wagged a finger at him. "You might watch your tone, Snivellus," he said. "I might decide that I want to kill Wormtail—"

"—I called it," Severus interrupted smoothly.

"I have no problem with cheating," Black replied. "I could always say those two little words before you can. I'm the quicker draw—"

"—in your dreams, Black," Severus countered. "You're past your prime—"

Black scoffed. "There's a bet I wouldn't lose. I've *always* been faster than you."

"I'll bet you wouldn't be able to do it," Severus lied, just to goad the other man. "You'd take one look at the precious fourth Marauder, and you'd go limp and dewy-eyed and think maybe Pettigrew deserves another chance."

The goad did not penetrate Black's thick skin. This was made obvious by great snort that erupted from Black. "I could kill him in the blink of an eye," he said. "Even quicker. I've fantasized about it for years. I've dreamed about it. But," he eyed Severus. "I suppose you have the better reason."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Other than that I called it?"

"You were in *love* with her after all," Black said smugly. "Though she didn't give you the time of day, good for her. I was only James' best mate—"

"Were you really?" Severus examined his nails. "Some of us wondered if you weren't in love with him after all. Tell me," he dropped his voice conversationally. "Did he always—"

Severus was slightly disgruntled at the fact that their conversation was halted by the opening of the doors that led to the Great Hall, and the increase in clamor that made it quite difficult to hear. *And I would've succeeded in offending him*, he thought, annoyed. But he stood up to his full height, and saw the familiar untidy hair. He was not at all surprised that Potter had shown up, bloody noble git that he was. *It's just so bloody unfair*, he thought, before he could stop himself.

"I saw that," Black smirked.

"Saw what?"

"That *grimace*," Black pointed out. "I know what you were thinking. You were thinking that Harry Potter's the biggest bloody hero the world has ever seen, and you *hate* what's going to happen next."

Severus paused for a very long time. Too long. He glared at Black for knowing that he could not deny this. "Maybe I was just wishing that it was you," he finally said. It sounded weak even to his own ears. Black showed a mercy that was quite unnatural for him and did not mock him. Instead, they both turned to where Potter stood. He was pale like death.

"Me too," Black said.

"I couldn't," Severus admitted. He did not think that he had the capacity to love more than a (very small) handful of people. He glanced at Black out of the corner of his eye. He was not fully comfortable with this moment of honesty, but he may die this day as well. Voldemort was not going to be happy once he realized where Severus' loyalties lay, and he thought he might have run out of his lucky dodges. But still. He at least had a small chance whereas--

Black's elbow connected with his ribs, and Severus realized with a jolt that the ringing in his ears was not, in fact, to do with his own thoughts about impending death. But Voldemort had arrived with an army. Severus had summoned him himself. Almost without thinking of it, he pulled up the sleeve of his robes. In the shadowy corner of the Great Hall, the rune seemed to cast light upon his Dark Mark.

He looked up to find Black blatantly staring at it. "Ugly, isn't it?" he said casually.

Black shrugged elaborately, and then gazed in the direction of Potter. "One man's shame is another man's badge of honor."

For a moment, Severus was stunned at the words. He felt a great weight on his chest, and he had to concentrate very hard in order to take a breath. "You must think you're about to die," Severus said. Indeed, Black looked like a man who had little to lose. He had that

hardened, reckless look that would never have fit on the face of the insolent teenager he used to be.

"Haven't got anything better to do," he said flippantly.

Severus felt much the same way. He did not think he would survive the revelation of his secret; Voldemort's revenge would, no doubt, be swift. He thought of Peter Pettigrew, and the cowardice that changed the world, and he reckoned it worth it. *He betrayed Lily*, Severus thought. He had no doubt that Black thought of Potter, and that they were of one mind. It did not matter that it had been the better part of two decades since their deaths: what they would do in memory of Lily and James would be worth the cost.

"Excuse me," Black murmured. Severus watched him walk away, and grip Potter in a fierce hug. Severus turned away and took a few steps in Dumbledore's direction. Dumbledore met him halfway. Severus was glad that he did not say a word; the older wizard obviously sensed that if he offered a platitude or an optimistic lie or a pithy saying, Severus would pull his wand on him. It made Severus deeply uncomfortable that one man had been fated to do this.

"If this is the universe's way of redressing a wrong," Severus said in a low, vicious voice. "If this is the way it makes up for allowing Voldemort to exist..."

Dumbledore still said nothing. He did not appear to be waiting for Severus to finish his sentence.

Instead, it was Voldemort's voice that came next. Voldemort, who told Harry to give himself up. Voldemort, who was planning to murder Lily's son. Voldemort, who had once been Severus' master. Severus felt a grim satisfaction that Voldemort still believed that Severus was his most loyal follower. He had been waiting for this moment for years. He thought of the way Pettigrew would fall, and his fingers tightened on his wand.

Severus and Dumbledore were like two small islands of silence in a raging sea of questions as Harry Potter and his wife and closest friends left the Great Hall and went into the Entrance Hall. He thought Potter might be giving his last goodbyes, and did not want to intrude.

Potter had only told a handful of people what he was about to do because Potter did not want to say goodbye to everyone. Severus respected that; what man would want to have a drawn-out death bed scene that did not involve ill-health, but a long walk to meet the wand of the wizard who had killed his parents? But still... Severus wished he could have said something to the boy. But he had no idea what that would have been.

He suspected it would have been an apology.

He and Dumbledore walked side by side through the throng of confused people. The Weasleys (minus Ron) crowded together and spoke together in low whispers. Percy stood a little way away from the rest of his family, and he looked as though he had been hit in the back of the head with a Bludger. Severus thought he might suspect something of what was about to happen. The twins, holding identical broomsticks, were speaking in loud, frustrated voices.

Severus entered the Entrance Hall at the exact moment Potter left, stepping out into the twilight and vanishing from sight. For a few moments, it was only those who knew. Granger's eyes were wide and filled with tears, and Weasley's face was screwed up as though he were protecting himself from very bright sunlight. Black stared at the ground, his eyes tightly closed. And Lovegood held Ginny Potter in a tight, fierce hug. She looked very small, and Severus was forcibly reminded of another red-head, beloved of a Potter...

"What's going on, Ron?" Charlie Weasley asked loudly, breaking the strange moment. "What's he doing?"

"You heard him," Weasley said roughly. "He's unleashing his terrible power."

"But... are we still going to fight?" Fred asked, confused. "Will we even have to?"

"Yes," Weasley said. He took several deep breaths. "Yes, of course we are. We need to -- you've got to"--with what appeared to take great effort, Weasley turned to look at those who had just joined them--"I want everyone in place. Right now. Now is the moment. While Voldemort is distracted."

"But what is this terrible power?" Lupin asked. "I don't--"

"It's love," said Dumbledore. "Love as deep and wide as the sea and just as fierce."

"Harry is a Horcrux, Remus," Black said. "He has to die."

"That's what he's doing right now," Weasley said. He had turned his back, and was now staring at the space between the castle and Voldemort and his followers. It appeared empty. Severus did not think that Potter would reveal himself until the very end.

"No," Molly Weasley moaned. The rest of the Weasleys, Lupin, Tonks, and all the members of the Order of the Phoenix echoed her, shock and the beginnings of grief etched on their faces. Severus could not look at them. He could only imagine how demoralizing it was for them; the one they had followed for so long was about to die, of his own free will, because of what Voldemort had done to him when he was a child.

"Everyone in place," Weasley repeated.

"But--"

"Do as I said!" Weasley shouted, when no one moved. "He's doing this so the rest of us will survive, and we're going to bloody survive, do you hear me? Fred -- George -- Charlie -- Bill -- get on your brooms. Everyone else -- Disillusionment Charm. Now."

"Ron," Lupin said. He cleared his throat and gestured toward the door. Severus watched as the Weasley brothers -- minus Percy and Ron -- mounted their brooms and vanished from sight. The others rippled into invisibility as well, until it appeared as though Severus, Weasley, Black, Granger, Ginny Potter, and Lupin were the only people inside the Entrance Hall.

"What?" Weasley said impatiently.

"He's all alone," Lupin said. "The dementors... can't we send our patronuses? He wouldn't -- he hates them -- I don't want him to die feeling the cold."

Weasley was silent. "We don't want Voldemort--"

"Do it," Ginny Potter said fiercely. She had moved to just inside the doors. "We'll all do it. Every single one of us that can. Hell, it's the least we can do. He taught half of us how to do it."

"You stay back," Weasley barked. "Don't even think about--"

"Don't try to protect me," Ginny said loudly. "I'm just as--"

"Enough," Dumbledore said softly. "Now is not the time for a disagreement. Now the incantation is, I believe, Expecto Patronum."

Whispers, murmurs, and loud voices filled the air as everyone took Dumbledore's lead. Severus paused for several moments, staring at Ginny Potter's Patronus. It was identical to his. Then he blinked, and it was gone, heading toward Harry to offer comfort in his last moments, to keep the chill of the dementors away from him. Severus moved so he could see out, and the space between was filled with bounding, silvery animals that lit the sky with their glow. He could just barely see the figure of a tall man.

There was a flash of green light and the man fell.

Severus felt a roaring in his ears, and the rune around his neck blazed with warmth. And without warning, without any sort of indication that anything of the sort would happen--

He found himself in his office, or a place identical to it. But it seemed brighter, and little flecks of light danced in front of his eyes. He found himself staring down at a potion -- a little drop jumped joyfully out of it. Felix Felicis. He looked up and met the eyes of Harry Potter.

Severus suddenly realized that he was very angry. And underneath that anger was a hurt more profound than he wanted to admit. He tried to hide from it, to mask it with cynicism, but he could not. He turned and hid his face.

"Thanks for loving my mum," Potter said. Severus did not think he had ever experienced anything quite like it. He blinked. Had he not just been standing in the Entrance Hall. Had he not just seen this

man fall? He looked down, and realized that the source of the light was the rune.

"I'm sorry," Severus said.

"I'm not," said Potter.

And with as little warning, Severus was once again standing where he was supposed to be. He touched the rune, and was surprised to find that it was not warm. It did not blaze with light. It was just a rune, carved in silver. What the hell? Severus glanced around surreptitiously, and found that he had obviously not been the only one to temporarily lose their grip on reality. Granger had her hand over her heart, gripping her rune fiercely.

"The charm," she said, her voice wondering. "He -- the rune -- is that what -- I think it..." But she did not seem able to answer. Severus did not think he had ever seen her at a loss for words. He had wanted to put a Silencing Charm on her so often; it figured that she would stop her relentless flow of words just when he wanted an explanation.

Severus scowled at her and hoped that Dumbledore would have an explanation. But Dumbledore apparently had no explanation either; or not one he was willing to share. He glanced over at Ginny Potter; her eyes were closed, and tears streamed down her cheeks. She was smiling. No one spoke for several moments; Severus had to concede that he might never find out what the hell had just happened.

"Now," Weasley said. It sounded as though it hurt him to breathe. There was an air of shocked silence. Severus could feel them moving out; several people brushed up against him. Gradually, the shock wore away to rage. Seamus Finnegan walked by him swearing foully in response to the laughter and cheers from the Death Eaters and the roaring from the giants.

"HE IS DEAD!" Pettigrew shouted so loudly that Severus was certain that he had used the Sonorus Charm. So Voldemort had had to use someone else to confirm the death of his enemy. This filled Severus with no small amount of satisfaction. Potter scared Voldemort even when he was dead.

"That's our cue," Black said grimly. There was a gleam of rubies, and then Black's robes closed over Gryffindor's sword. "Try not to enjoy yourself too much."

Severus bared his teeth at Black, drew his wand, and gripped the other man's upper arm tightly. He bumped into several invisible people as they exited, but they moved apart. Black swore loudly and fluently; he did not make any sense whatsoever. Together, they walked down the same path that Potter had taken. Black fought his grip and shouted obscenities. The Death Eaters watched them come.

They had no idea. Voldemort had no idea.

But Voldemort was occupied with other things. His wand was pointed at Potter's prone body. "*Crucio!*" he shouted gleefully. The body rose in the air once, twice, three times. Any last uncertainty fled. Potter's body had remained limp. No man could withstand that amount of pain without a twitch, without a scream. Severus forced his eyes away.

"Those in the castle will be easily subdued," Severus lied coolly. Just a few more lies. "They were quite distraught by Potter's death; they allowed me to escape," he added. He shook Black roughly. "Black was a traitor; he let them in." He pushed Black away from him roughly. He stumbled a little. "I would like your permission to kill him myself, my Lord," he said deferentially. "You know I have long hated him."

"Very well," Voldemort said. He seemed stunned by his own good fortune; his eyes kept returning to Potter's body as though he could not quite believe it. Severus allowed himself a brief glance at Nagini -- Black's task -- and felt an immense relief that in the next few moments, Voldemort would be mortal once more.

Severus did not bother to draw in a deep breath. He did not hesitate. He pushed Black to the side and raised his wand--

"*Avada Kedavra!*" he shouted.

Wormtail fell to the ground in a tangle of limbs. His mouth was parted slightly and his eyes were open and staring at the darkening sky. Severus felt a great sense of relief. The traitor was dead; vengeance had been achieved. The man who had been too much of a coward to

remain true to his friends would not say another word or take another breath. It was as though a large weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

Voldemort stared at him, red eyes glinting with shock and the beginning of anger.

"You killed Lily," Severus sneered.

"And James," Black added.

"And Harry," they said, almost at the same moment.

Black drew the sword out of his robes with one graceful movement, and Voldemort did not have a chance to comprehend what was about to happen, let alone retaliate. The sword glinted and slashed, and Nagini was hacked nearly in two. Black's face was alight and looked almost exactly as he had before he had gone to Azkaban. Voldemort's mouth fell open in shock--

And a great many things happened at once.

The giants, who had been standing about, gave great roars of pain. And then the three of them exploded in a shower of sparks and bits of body. Severus could hear a Weasley laughing, and then the night was lit up, not with gentle patronuses, but with curses and hexes. While Severus and Black had been a distraction, Weasley had ordered those who fought against Voldemort to surround them. Severus could not help it. He grinned.

"Checkmate, asshole!" he heard Weasley say over the din.

The brief interlude ended when Voldemort's face twisted with rage. He raised his wand, ready to curse Severus, to kill him--

The air beside him rippled and distorted, and Albus Dumbledore became visible again. The Elder Wand was already in his hand, and he was already saying an incantation that lifted the body of Harry Potter gently into the air and moved it to a quieter spot, out of the path of feet. "You will not desecrate his body again," he said quietly. There was a quality to his voice that reminded Severus of thunder.

Severus shared a long glance with Black. Then he looked at the Death Eaters. Then he looked at the two greatest wizards of the age, and decided that he did not want to miss this duel. He stepped ten feet away from them, walked around them, casting protective charms that would ensure that no person or spell could penetrate it--

And still they stared at each other. Dumbledore's long beard was as startlingly white as Voldemort's eyes were red...

And at the very same moment, they began to circle each other.

Chapter 45 – Always and Always

Harry opened his eyes.

He was lying on a bed in a small, windowless room that was nevertheless filled with a warm light. He felt as though he had just woken up from a nap. The room felt familiar, as though he had spent a lot of time here, but he had never seen it before in his life. But it felt almost like home, in the way that Ron's room at the Burrow had been, or the boys' dormitory at Hogwarts. It wasn't quite home, but it was close enough.

The fear and the pain had fled, though Harry felt a dull ache in his belly when he remembered what he had left behind. Ginny. Ron. Hermione. Luna. All the Weasleys. Sirius, Remus, and Tonks. Dumbledore... even Snape. The room seemed darker all of a sudden.

Harry stood up, figuring that he might as well explore wherever he was, and as soon as he did, the sound of indistinct voices reached his ears. His heart leapt in his chest before he fully realized that he recognized one of them. Then, listening hard, he knew exactly who was waiting for him.

He looked down at himself, grimacing when he realized that he was naked. Despite his impatience and his desire to see them, he found himself really hoping that dead people didn't walk around naked all the time. As soon as the thought crossed his mind, he noticed robes hanging off the bedpost. He grabbed them and pulled them on.

Then he flung open the door and walked down the hall feeling too many different emotions to process them all. Excitement warred with sadness, curiosity warred with the desire to not be here just yet. And he was more than half afraid of meeting his parents for the first time in living memory. And he was thrilled beyond belief to see Neville again.

They were obviously watching for him, for as soon as he caught sight of them, his mother was rushing toward him with her arms outstretched and she nearly knocked him over with the force of her

hug. "Oh, love," she wept. Harry patted her gently on the back. "My arms have been empty for so long..."

"Let him breathe, Lily," his father said gently. He disentangled them, and had his turn for a hug.

Harry looked over his shoulder to see Neville beaming at him. "Hey, Neville," said Harry.

"Hey, Harry," said Neville.

Tears stung Harry's eyes, but he didn't really care. He already missed Ginny and the others fiercely, but at least he wasn't alone. "I didn't know it would be like this." He laughed a little. "Maybe I wouldn't have been so afraid."

"Listen, Harry," his mum said quietly. "Love is always and always. Our bodies may turn to dust, but love never ends. Therefore we never end. Death is nothing to fear, love."

"I know that," Harry said. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"You fear losing more people to death," Neville said. "But really... you haven't lost us forever. You're just going to have to say goodbye for a time."

Harry was confused. "But... I'm dead too. Aren't I?"

"Not really," his dad said.

"But... the Deathly Hallows..." Harry let his voice trail away in confusion. How was it possible that he wasn't dead? He didn't have any of the Hallows, let alone all three.

"The Deathly Hallows had nothing to do with your survival last time," said his mum. "It was my sacrifice that did it, Harry. He took your blood, and you're tied to life while he lives."

Harry felt the disorientation that involved being confronted a stolen memory, and he growled. "It was Merlin who did this, wasn't it," he said. It wasn't a question. "He made me think I was going to die,

didn't he?" Harry's eyebrows slammed together. "I thought I was going to die for years! Of all the -- that was really fucked up of him!"

"At this very moment, everyone you love is now immune to death from Voldemort's wand," his dad said. "You meant to die for them. You did the same thing for them that your mother did for you. If you had known that you would survive... they would not have had that protection."

It clicked into place. Dumbledore had always claimed that with magic, intent was most important. It enhanced the strength of spells, it allowed people to do things that they might not have otherwise. Even Bellatrix Lestrange had claimed long ago in another lifetime that he had to mean it. She'd been speaking of the Unforgivables, but it fit here as well. While he still felt a lingering annoyance, his brief flare of rage at the torment Merlin had put him through was dampened by the fact that his loved ones were safe. He felt a churn of guilt when he met Neville's eyes.

"Neville--"

"Don't you dare, Harry," Neville said sharply. "My death was not your fault. There was nothing you could have done. And I meant it when I said that I have no regrets. Harry... my parents are here, too."

Harry searched his open, honest face. Neville had never been able to lie worth a damn, but the only thing Harry saw was peace. "I'm still going to miss you," said Harry. "All three of you. I'm going to wish you were there with me."

"But don't you dare keep blaming yourself for why we aren't," his dad commanded. "I've wanted to tell you that for so many years, son."

"But if I hadn't been--"

"Stop," his mum said firmly. "You were just a baby. My baby. Voldemort is to blame for the losses you've suffered, and it's time you stop feeling guilty for being the only person who can defeat him."

"You just need to realize that people love you as much as you love them," Neville said. "And yeah, I might not have died if we hadn't been friends. But I don't regret a single moment. It was worth it."

Harry closed his eyes, his mind whirling. How many times had he thought that very thing in the last few days? It was worth it. They were worth it. He had never really considered that people might still consider protecting him with their own bodies worth it even after they were dead. It was a very humbling feeling, and the guilt he carried that never really went away began to recede.

"Your time is almost up," said his mum. "Unless... you don't want to stay here, do you?"

Harry immediately thought of Ginny. "I'm sorry... but--"

"Don't apologize," said his dad. "We want you to live your life."

"I want three grandchildren," his mum leaned over and stroked his hair. The smile she gave him was a bit watery. "Minimum."

Harry had to swallow several times before the lump in his throat disappeared and he could speak again. "I'm sure Ginny and I could arrange something like that."

All four of them stood up in the same moment. Harry knew that he would miss them. He'd look for them at his wedding, at the births of his children, at all his life's milestones. But they wouldn't be there. They'd be here, though, waiting for him to return after a long life. And the thought filled him with peace.

"Harry, we're so proud of you," his dad said earnestly. "Having you for a son is really quite an honor. You're the bravest man I've ever met."

"Thanks, Dad," Harry said in a hoarse voice. He alternated staring at both of them. He wanted to memorize their features and the sound of their voices, and the way his mother kept hooking her hair behind her ears, and the way his father ruffled his hair every few minutes. "And Mum. You both saved my life at the expense of your own, and it was a precious gift."

He hugged his mother, and his father put his arms around the both of them. They stood like that for a long moment, and Harry thought it had been worth getting hit by the Killing Curse just to see them like this, and to feel them next to him for the first time that he could remember.

"I want you to tell Sirius something," his dad said suddenly.

"Oh, James," Lily rolled her eyes.

"He lost the bet, Lily," James said firmly. "Tell Sirius that just because I'm dead, doesn't mean that he's gotten out of honoring our bet. His first child is to be named Elvendork."

"Elvendork?" Harry repeated, astonished.

"It's unisex," James winked.

Harry laughed while his mother muttered something that sounded very much like "Marauders." His father beamed at him, pulled his mother to him with one arm and kissed the top of her head. Harry turned to Neville, wanting the last image of his parents to be just that.

Harry reached out his hand to shake Neville's, and then pulled him into a back-slapping hug.

"Live happily, Harry," Neville said simply.

"We're all going to miss you very much," Harry said.

Neville smiled. "And I'll be anticipating all of you. It's only good bye for a little while."

White mist surrounded Harry, and soon Neville's face was indistinct. He heard his dad's muffled voice one final time. "We love you, son. Remember Elvendork!"

And then they were gone.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

The first thing that Harry felt upon his return to life was the ground underneath his back, and the shape of his wand against his chest. His ears rang with the shouts of laughter of the Death Eaters. Distantly, he could hear others screaming, and thought it might be those that fought against Voldemort. Tom Riddle struggled to his feet; apparently he had fallen as Harry had.

"Don't try to talk," said Merlin immediately. "They wouldn't hear you, but they'd see your lips move."

Harry, who still felt slightly resentful that whoever Merlin was had so blithely toyed with his life, wanted to assure him that Harry was not quite as stupid as the other wizard apparently thought. He'd had no intention of opening his mouth or, indeed, opening his eyes.

"Is he dead?" Voldemort asked. "Check to see, Wormtail."

"Imperio," whispered Merlin. Harry's eyes involuntarily fluttered behind his closed lids. Wormtail's steps faltered just a moment before he plodded onward. Harry felt grim satisfaction that Wormtail had seemed fearful just moments before. And Tom Riddle... he was afraid of Harry, even though he had just taken the Killing Curse without defending himself.

Which, he thought begrudgingly, had likely saved his life. He still thought it a bit dodgy that Merlin had played him so well. Not to mention that he'd fooled Dumbledore... Harry had to admit that this did not concern him overmuch. In fact, he was slightly impressed. Questions battered his mind, and he did not allow a small inconvenience like Wormtail ascertaining whether or not Harry Potter drew breath distract him. But try as he might, he could make no sense of Merlin's presence. He had obviously stolen Harry's memories years ago (he briefly thought Merlin might be Lockhart, and had to hold back a snort of laughter). Why would he be there tonight? Or was it as he had said? He'd simply not wanted Harry to be alone at the end.

If that was the case, Harry appreciated the sentiment behind it, but it seemed risky, hopping through time, just to keep a man company in the moments before he didn't die. He hid a grimace when Wormtail pried back an eyelid.

"He is dead!" shouted Wormtail. He scuttled back toward his master. The air around Harry's face moved; Merlin had bent over him.

"I can't take the pain away," he said. This apparently distressed him; he sounded fretful. "But I can hold you immobile. You won't be able to scream; you won't have to hold it in. You can scream all you want, and your body won't betray you. Is this all right?"

The Cruciatus Curse, Harry thought grimly. Of course Voldemort would want to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that he had bested Harry. Had he been given a chance to think about it, he would have come to this conclusion himself.

"Yes," Harry breathed. A moment later, his bones became slack and useless, and he briefly wondered if Merlin actually was Lockhart, and had removed all the bones from his body. But he got the impression (from the fact that he had broken into Gringotts, the Department of Mysteries, and successfully traveled through time without blowing up the world) that Merlin was not quite that incompetent.

The pain hit a moment later.

Every nerve in Harry's body was hit with wave after wave of agony. He tried to open his mouth to scream, but he could not feel his lips, or his tongue. All he could feel was pain. His body was thrown up in the air once, twice, three times and Harry feared that the agony would cause him to vomit, and then he would choke.

There was a light brush on the top of his head, and Harry focused on what must have been Merlin's hand, offering comfort, the only thing that he could feel that wasn't making him scream his lungs out inside his head...

"It's all right," Merlin murmured. "It's almost over. Just a few more moments. And then that fucker will be dead in less than an hour. That fucker," he added viciously. Harry focused on that voice; he could hear it through the pain.

And then the pain ended, as if a switch had been thrown. Harry panted for breath (or he would have done had his body been obeying his commands). The big muscles in his legs twitched. It was really

driven home to Harry in that moment; The Cruciatus Curse was Unforgivable for a reason. That did not, however, mean that Harry did not desire to use it on Voldemort and Wormtail, the last real enemies of his left alive.

Merlin did not appear to be in any hurry to lift the spell that left Harry's body slack.

Two sets of purposeful footsteps. Harry could hear Sirius swearing under his breath. "Those in the castle will be easily subdued," said Snape. "They were quite distraught by Potter's death. They allowed me to escape." There was a thump and a muffled groan. "Allow me to kill him myself, my Lord. You know I have long hated him."

Despite the lingering aches from the pain, and the slightly soporific effect it had had on him, Harry was ready to jump up and begin dueling Voldemort right at this moment. Sirius and Snape had walked into the den of snakes, and it was more agonizing than the Cruciatus Curse to not act.

"Avada Kedavra!" Snape shouted. And Harry knew without having to look that the body that had fallen to the ground was not Sirius' but Wormtail's. The long ago betrayal had finally been avenged.

"You killed Lily," said Snape.

"And James," said Sirius.

"And Harry," they both said together.

Harry tried to fight against the spell, for he did not see how either of them could survive this; his return from the dead would distract Voldemort long enough, and then they would duel. But he remained prone even as all hell broke loose. Voldemort screamed with rage; the earth shook beneath Harry's body, and explosions rocked the world.

"Checkmate, asshole!" Ron shouted. Harry lay on his back like an absurd turtle, unable to move. He hated this, but the spell held him captive. And then--

"You will not desecrate his body again," said Dumbledore. His voice was low and even, but Harry could hear the danger in it. And as his body was lifted into the air, gently and surely, he savagely hoped that Dumbledore would tear Voldemort to pieces.

Harry found himself floating away from the scene of the battle. Dumbledore's quiet words filled him with warmth, even as he longed to reveal that he was alive. The night was alive with the sound of fighting, screaming, and exploding giants. And he knew that those he loved must be feeling a terrible sort of despair. He'd heard it in Ron's voice when he had shouted, and it did not seem fair that he kept the fact of his own survival to himself.

But Merlin had not yet released him from the spell.

Harry privately thanked Dumbledore for putting him in a position that the field of battle was clear in his vision; he was far away enough to be safe in opening his eyes. He greedily searched the crowd of battling bodies, for those he loved. His heart leapt whenever he saw a head of flaming hair. Ron was brilliant; Harry had not fully appreciated how talented of a wizard his best mate had become. But when Ron moved his wand, Death Eaters fell, and did not get up. Hermione led a section of Muggleborns in driving the dementors back to the forest. The patronuses, which had seemed so benign while Harry had been waiting for the curse, looked like wild animals as they harried the chill, dark-robed creatures.

And Ginny was like a blazing light in a sea of darkness. She and Luna stood back to back, and both of them danced and wove and ducked around flashes of light. Harry could not take his eyes off her, and his heart pounded inside his chest as he watched her cut a swath through the Death Eaters.

The Weasley twins were death from the sky, and once the giants had fallen they focused on the flank of Voldemort's army. Their beating skills served them well as they attacked; Harry did not once see them miss and hit someone fighting for the right side. It took only a few minutes of watching for Harry to realize that Ron had planned well, utilized the strengths of those under his command, and that the larger army (Voldemort's) were going to be routed.

He focused his attention, instead, on the battle between the two most powerful wizards in Britain, perhaps even in the Western hemisphere. It was a thing of beauty and terror, and Harry's heart nearly failed in his chest time and again. Dumbledore had the Elder Wand, but Voldemort was cold and ruthless and Harry was hard-pressed to predict who would win this duel.

Lightning flashed from the Elder Wand, and even over the sound of battle, Harry could hear Voldemort's scream of pain. He countered it with impenetrable darkness that covered the ground where they dueled. Whatever had come with the darkness caused a roar of fury that Harry had never before heard from Dumbledore.

Merlin said something. Harry realized with some surprise that he could move his lips again.

"What?" he said. At just that moment, Dumbledore slashed open Voldemort's leg; blood sprayed out, and Harry could see it, so fierce was the light of battle.

"I understand what always and always means now," replied Merlin. "I mean... I really understand it."

"I keep finding that always and always means a hell of a lot more than I thought," Harry said vaguely. The desire to fight was keen and growing ever stronger, even as more and more of Voldemort's followers fell. People were already stopping; a small crowd huddled in a circle around the duel. Sirius and Snape were among them.

"Let me up," said Harry.

Merlin sighed. "I have to, don't I?" he said. "I bloody hate fate, you know?"

Harry let out a bark of laughter. "You're telling me this? I've had a prophecy hanging over my head since before I was born. My parents were murdered because of it. I don't think there's anything in the world that I hate more."

"Me either," said Merlin.

"Now," Harry gritted his teeth. "Will you let me up? I want to help them!"

Merlin did not say anything more, but moments later, the muscles in Harry's body (not just his face) began to respond to his commands again. His entire body tingled, as though it had been asleep, and his skin prickled. Harry lay there for a moment, relishing the feeling of his lungs contracting and his heart beating. It hit him again that once this night was over, the rest of his life stretched out before him.

"Excuse me while I go kill an evil bastard," said Harry.

But before he could stand up, something soft and silky landed on his chest. The Invisibility Cloak, returned to him at last. Harry stood and threw it over himself with one fluid motion, and seconds later was sprinting down the hill to where to Dumbledore and Voldemort, two giants, one light and one dark, engaged in battle.

They moved so quickly that Harry's eyes could barely track it. The earth beneath their feet was parched, and little pockets of flame burned within a protective circle. Giant hands made of dirt had wrapped themselves around Voldemort's ankles, and he fought to free himself even as he sent another curse at Dumbledore. The crowd gathered around the fighters had grown, and Harry realized with a start that the battle was essentially over. Death Eaters were scuttling away, and Voldemort was the only one left still fighting.

And fight he did. Harry had come close to some Muggleborns when Dumbledore gave a cry of pain that bubbled on the end. His heart leapt in his chest, and he drew in a deep breath with the rest of the crowd. He pushed his way through the ring, hoping that Dumbledore was not--

"Incarcerous!" Dumbledore shouted. Not for the first time, Harry cursed the fact that it was far too dangerous for Dumbledore to use the Elder Wand to kill. Violence beget violence, but Harry suddenly wished for a quick death (little though he deserved it) for Voldemort.

"--obviously flagging," Remus said in a low, urgent voice. "Take down the protective circle, Severus. We can all go help him."

"I--" Snape began.

But Harry interrupted him. "Allow me," he said, and pulled off his cloak.

For several moments, the two older men could only stare. And without saying a word, Snape lifted his wand and let the wards come crashing down. Harry did not waste a moment, but shouted "Sectumsemptra!" and a long gash that dripped with blood appeared on the same arm that Harry had injured before.

He shouted again, but this time, Voldemort deflected it. A shield charm spread like a poisonous mushroom between the two of them. For almost an entire minute, Harry was the only one capable of movement and speech. Voldemort listed heavily to the side, and even Dumbledore's arm fell slack.

Harry took advantage of the moment to find Ginny. She stood with Ron and Hermione, and her beautiful face was alight with joy. As soon as Voldemort was taken care of, Harry vowed to whisk her away and celebrate the wonder of having a lifetime of freedom to enjoy each other.

"You -- you're dead," Voldemort said.

Harry made a show of surprise. "I must be an extra-concentrated ghost, then," he said flippantly. "But I'm fairly certain that I'm still alive." Harry lazily flicked his wand, and a yawning pit opened up beneath Voldemort's feet. Now that it was the moment, Harry felt all his lingering trepidation slip away. All of the Horcruxes had been destroyed and Voldemort was just a man.

A man who shouted and twisted and fought to scramble to his feet.

"You're a very stupid man, Tom," Harry said. The shield had dissipated, and creeping vines erupted from Harry's wand and wrapped around Voldemort's scrambling feet. A small part of Harry knew that it was dangerous to play with the other wizard, but the majority of him enjoyed it far too much to stop now. "Do you want to know why? Your short-sightedness has cost you everything. We've tricked you every step of the way, and you've fallen into our hands just when we wanted you."

"Lies!" Voldemort shouted.

"You're already dead," Harry told him.

"You can't kill me," he hissed. "I've taken steps--"

"Oh, you mean that you've created Horcruxes?" Harry asked. He was delighted to see the panic that flared in Voldemort's eyes. "All of them have been destroyed. The cup. The locket. The snake. The diary. The diadem. The ring. They're all gone."

Voldemort's fury exploded and the night was suddenly alive with shapes made of destructive fire. Dragons and chimeras and serpents raced to destroy all in its path. For one frozen moment, Harry was transported to his first lifetime, and he was powerless.

"NO!" he shouted. He and Dumbledore and Ron and Ginny were the first to react. And Harry fought a battle with a flaming serpent. Sweat rolled down his face as he forced it into submission. The sky around him was like an inferno, and people were screaming--

And just as suddenly they were gone. Voldemort stood on shaking legs, and it suddenly struck Harry that he was an old man. A twisted old man that was very much mortal.

"Nice try," Harry said. "Sectumsempra!" he said again. Voldemort screamed and fell to one knee as blood gushed from his right leg. He staggered to his feet again. His face was twisted with fury and denial. Harry did not hesitate, but encased his enemy's feet in the ground. The spell held, though Voldemort fought it. He roared with animalistic rage.

"Love will always, always conquer," said Harry. "The last enemy that shall be defeated is death," he quoted. "Even when someone's last breath is drawn, love goes on forever. For always and always. You're a fool. You spent so much time trying to conquer death that you didn't realize that the one force in the entire world that can is the one thing that you shunned."

Voldemort jeered. "You are so like Dumbledore," he said scathingly. He abandoned his attempt to free himself. They stood, for a moment,

just pointing their brother wands at each other. "Love is pathetic. It's for the weak. It--"

"It's for always and always," Harry said. "But you'll never be able to understand that."

"Oh, I understand," Voldemort said. His face contorted into something like a smile, had that face still been human enough to smile. And before Harry could move, he'd shouted a word, and a sickly purple light came toward Harry--

But it disappeared before it could strike, and then Voldemort had twisted his body and raised his wand toward Ginny, and the green light of the Killing Curse struck her right on the breast.

Harry caught her before she fell. He did not even spare a glance to watch Voldemort struck with his own rebounding curse. He barely heard the body fall to the ground. He did not listen to the screams and shouts of those who did not realize that Ginny could not possibly be dead, because if there was anyone present that Harry's love would protect from death, it would be her. He'd meant to die for everyone there; but he'd come back for her.

"Wake up, Ginny," he said softly. He cradled her in his arms. She drew in a deep breath, and her eyelashes fluttered open. He did not give her a chance to speak, but pressed his lips against hers in a kiss that was one part desperation, and three parts joy. She returned his kiss with great fervor, and when they finally pulled away, Harry felt an intense burning inside his chest that was painful and wonderful all at once.

Ron was the first to react. With a cry that sounded like a mixture of a shout and a sob, he wrapped his arms around them both, and for one glorious moment it was just the three of them. They had lost so much, given everything they had, and a miracle had happened. Tears ran unabashedly down Ron's face. And then Hermione was there. And then Sirius, who lifted Harry off his feet, and deafened him with laughter that sounded rich and unfettered.

It was when he and Ginny were separated (her mother and father had pulled her away and into their arms after shaking Harry's hand) that

Harry noticed something odd. Emotions swirled and rolled around him... and he halted midway through a shouted conversation with Tonks when he realized that he felt Ginny's elation that he, Harry, was alive.

"What's wrong?" said Tonks.

"Nothing," said Harry. His eyes found Ginny's; they were round with shock. "Everything is perfect. I can't believe it..." he laughed. He felt so giddy that he wondered if he had gone mad. And he didn't much care. He felt another surge of joy that was not his own and, abandoning Remus and Tonks in mid-congratulations, Harry made his way back to her.

"Is that you?" they asked in unison.

"I think so," Ginny said. She laid a hand on his breast.

Harry started when she winced when he did the same. "You're hurt!" he said.

"Not really," she shrugged. Then she gave him a lop-sided smile. "I'll bet I've got a scar to match yours."

"Can we go find out?" Harry grinned at her. He glanced around. Already, Kingsley was organizing people to take the fallen Death Eaters to the Ministry of Magic. Others huddled in groups, looking stunned and happy. Harry knew that he ought not to abandon everyone. He was certain that Ron and Hermione would need an explanation. They deserved one.

But he and Ginny had both just survived the Killing Curse, and Harry thought they were entitled to a little alone time. She evidently felt the same, as she did not even put up a token resistance when he started to pull her away toward the castle. The Room of Requirement awaited them.

Luna sat halfway up the hill. Her face was hidden in the shadows, but Harry would know that cloud of blond hair anywhere. Harry stopped short when he saw her, suddenly remembering Merlin. He did not know what Merlin had changed. He would probably never know and

he was all right with that for the moment (though he suspected that his curiosity would come back fully when he had had a chance to process everything). But for now...

"Will you tell Merlin I said thank you for whatever he did?" Harry asked. "If you see him?"

"You're welcome," said Merlin. Luna didn't say anything.

"And thanks for giving me back my cloak," said Harry.

There was an awkward moment while Harry teetered on the edge of begging for answers. But Ginny's impatience to be alone fired up his own impatience, and Harry resisted the urge to use magic to force Merlin to give up his secrets. It was the least he could do.

And then they were walking very quickly, almost running, and Ginny burbled with laughter as they headed up the stairs. Harry practically dragged her behind him (his legs were far longer than hers), and whenever the moving staircases held them in one place, he kissed her with the passion that was rising swiftly inside them both.

The door had barely shut before Harry had his wand out and had exposed her left breast. A cut in the shape of a lightning bolt bled freely and he winced.

"I barely feel it," Ginny said almost shyly.

"Even a little pain is too much," Harry said. He narrowed his eyes in concentration and began to siphon the blood away.

"I want to keep the scar," Ginny said. Harry looked up swiftly and saw that tears poured down her cheeks.

"What's this?" he asked.

"I'm just..." Ginny shrugged one shoulder. "What happened?"

And Harry told her everything. His conversations with Merlin, his experience with his parents... everything. She listened as he slowly healed her cut, leaving a scar that matched his own. Normally he

would not like her flesh being marred in such a way, but he had to admit that it seemed fitting. He sat back on his heels--

And the chair she was sitting on transformed into a bed.

"Was that you or me?" Ginny asked slyly.

"Both of us, I think," Harry said. He crawled up beside her as she lay back. "What better way to celebrate our mutual survival of the Killing Curse?"

She grinned. Then her smile faded into something more contemplative and she laced her fingers with his. "The moment you died, I had a sort of vision of you," she admitted. Harry gaped at her, and she continued. "We were making love. And you told me that even though you were gone, a little part of you would always be making love to a little part of me."

Harry fell back. "I've never heard of anything like that before," he said.

"I think it's partly why I can feel you now," she said. "And why you can feel me. I don't know -- we'll have to ask Dumbledore -- but... it makes sense. And then when the curse hit me... I saw you again. And you gave me that cheeky grin, and said you had work to do, and I felt this wonderful warmth all over my body. It was like you were within me."

Harry leaned over and kissed her because he didn't know quite what to say. How did one respond to visions one's wife had about oneself? "I want to be within you right now," Harry moved on top of her and whispered in her ear.

She chuckled against his lips. "Just promise me one thing."

"Anything."

"Let's not tell everyone that we had Merlin in our grasp again and did nothing about it..."

Chapter 46 – The Sweet Far Thing

The country lane was quiet. A spring breeze rustled the leaves in the orchard, and dappled sunlight shone through. Harry put his hand on the small of Ginny's back and stared at the crooked building that had countless good memories attached to it. In many ways, he had been given back his stolen childhood. This building -- along with Hogwarts, Godric's Hollow, and Grimmauld Place -- had been a kind of home. Not fully. Not completely. But his experience with his parents in that strange limbo between life and death had taught him what he valued most: home.

And the Burrow came close to being the home he had never really had, because of the people in it.

They had not yet been back here. Spring had eased into summer, and it had been an unspoken agreement that Harry, Ginny, Ron (and, by default, Hermione), would not go back to the Burrow until most of the mess that had been made had been cleaned up. It was a reward. But the Death Eaters who had not been taken down at the final battle had been rounded up, given trials, and thrown into Azkaban. The dementors had been exiled. The Ministry had welcomed the Muggleborns back with recompense, apologies, and a large ceremony.

A large ceremony much like that had taken place earlier this afternoon. Harry grimaced, remembering. I hate giving speeches, he thought sourly. Ginny, who obviously felt something through the ephemeral connection they now shared, squeezed his hand. Though she doesn't really need to feel my feelings to know what's going on in my head, Harry admitted to himself. He glanced down at her. She knew him almost better than he knew himself.

They had been inseparable since the moment Harry had caught her.

"Are you ready?" asked Ginny.

Harry nodded. They walked, hands clasped, the rest of the way up the lane. It seemed like a different lifetime (and Harry knew very well what having two separate lifetimes felt like) when he had been exiled

from the Burrow. He could remember the snow crunching under his feet, could feel the weight of his trunk, and could hear the distant shouting. But the anger, resentment, and hurt that had sunk into his bones had disappeared. His heart felt very light.

"I'm glad that's over," said Harry. He fiddled with his Order of Merlin First Class, for Valor. It was the size of his fist, made out of blown glass with an ebony base inlaid with opals and diamonds. Inside it was a blue flame that would burn forever. He could not keep his eyes from traveling back to it every few moments.

"Me too," Ginny said, heartfelt. "Kingsley's pretty brilliant, you know? I never quite appreciated that fully."

Harry could not agree more. Kingsley -- who had assumed the position of Minister for Magic with skill -- had spun a tale of half-truths that did enough to explain exactly why Harry, Ginny, and Ron had received a new class of the Order of Merlin. They had, of course, refused to explain about the time travel. He had briefly wondered if he was drawing his secrets close to him as Aberforth had once accused Albus Dumbledore of doing. But the potential for disaster was too great. No, it was best if it remained a secret. Future spouses would know, of course; someday Harry and Ginny, Ron and Hermione would tell their children.

"What was that?" Ginny asked, startled.

"What was what?" Harry furrowed his brow.

"That feeling you just had," she looked perplexed. "I've not felt it before."

"Don't you sometimes wish this emotion-sharing thing came with a textbook?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Ginny replied immediately. "And then we could have Hermione read it and tell us what's happening."

It was frustrating not to have a name for this new level of sharing. What had seemed like a fluke after Voldemort had tried to kill Ginny and had been felled with his own rebounded curse, had become

something permanent. Harry could feel her inside him as if he was blown glass, and she was everlasting flame.

"You're thinking about me," Ginny said. "But what was it you thought about before? There was this tenderness I've never felt off you."

"I thought about the children we're going to have," Harry admitted. He felt another little burst of joy, and could not tell whether it came from Ginny or himself. His future stretched out before him. There were no regrets. Voldemort was gone, and Harry did not feel that awful pain that he'd known would never go away. He was free to grow old with her, to father children, and to live and laugh.

"Let's go inside before we start grinning at each other all night," said Ginny. "Again."

Harry had expected they would be the last to arrive. The Burrow was filled to bursting with members of the Order of the Phoenix. Only those who knew everything had been invited; tomorrow, there would be a public party on the grounds of Hogwarts. Tonight, a more private celebration was in order. So the crooked little home was bustling with everyone Harry loved most. Except Ron and Hermione.

"Where's Ron?" Harry asked anyone who would listen. "I want to tease him for crying."

"Hermione's probably comforting him," Fred smirked. He gave Harry a small grin, but looked away quickly before walking off to find George. Harry watched him go, feeling a small pang. He had hoped that all could be forgiven and forgotten. It had seemed as though things were heading that way before the final battle.

He winced when he remembered the way in which he had thrown the truth at them. He'd slapped them in the face with it; it had felt great at the time. He'd felt vindicated. He'd wanted to hurt them as much as they'd hurt him, and it had not helped matters any that he had been drunk. He did not like being reminded how self-righteous he had been.

"We'll just have to work at it," Harry murmured.

"It'll happen," Ginny said bracingly.

Harry nodded. His newly positive outlook on life in general was strong enough to endure the slight distance at which the Weasleys had kept themselves from him. It couldn't last forever. He'd make it up to them eventually. He could not help, however, looking around for Arthur Weasley. Perhaps it was because he was at the Burrow, and it might've been because he could use advice, but Harry found himself wishing that he could take some snacks out to the shed.

More than that, he wanted the type of relationship that he once had with Arthur. Instead, he wandered over to where Sirius, Remus, and (to his surprise) Snape already sat at the long table in the backyard of the Burrow. They'd lit a lantern against the approaching night. Their Order of Merlin, First Classes (which looked quite like Harry's, though without the diamonds in the base) did not quite cast enough of a glow, though they were displayed proudly before them nonetheless. Harry glanced around and grinned. The abundance of awards were the decorative theme; Molly had set them out like candles. The smaller Order of Merlin, Second Classes (which had been received by all the Weasleys) floated in the air above the table.

Harry still found himself shocked by the camaraderie between Snape and the other two. A part of him simply thought it just wasn't normal that the three of them had actively sought each other out. As he watched, Tonks (displaying her rather flashy engagement ring) swung her leg over the bench to sit beside Remus.

The floor dropped out from under his feet when he realized what, exactly, they were talking about.

"You damn well are going to be a Marauder," Sirius said. "Don't give me any bullshit, Snivellus."

"I had planned to rise above it," said Snape. He did not appear as though he wanted to argue at all. In fact, he looked as pleased as Harry had ever seen him. "If you notice, I don't feel compelled to engage in your petty squabbles."

Sirius gave a great snort of disbelief. "Sure," he said. "I'll remind you that you said that. Now. We've tried and tried to come up with a Marauder name for you, and we just can't do it. You'll have to help us."

"We've had to put the matter to serious thought," Remus said. "We can't just give you a name that doesn't have any meaning."

"Which is why I think 'Greasy' is splendid," Sirius interrupted smoothly.

"Will the two of you ever grow up?" Snape said. Harry hid a smile.

"He's always reminded me of a giant bat," said Harry. "How about 'Batty'?" Sirius and Remus roared with laughter and Tonks chuckled appreciatively. At Snape's quelling glare, he added. "Sorry. Professor Batty."

"What about 'Slippery'?" Tonks asked. Remus winked at her, slipping an arm around her shoulders. Then he exchanged an incredulous look with Sirius.

"Girls can't help name Marauders," Sirius said kindly. "So sorry, cousin, but even if we did like the name--"

"--which we don't," Snape said irritably. He kept his face hidden, and Harry suspected that he was smiling.

"We couldn't accept it," Remus said apologetically. "Don't look at me like that, love. James made the rules."

Several more suggestions and one hex later, and the tempers at the far side of the table were running high. Snape had just cast a Bat Bogey hex at Sirius for suggesting 'Mugglebane.' Granted, his heart had obviously not been in it; only two little bats escaped from Sirius' nostrils. And Sirius continued to laugh, apparently not noticing small winged animals fleeing from his body.

"How about 'Blackhart'?" Harry suggested. "Black H-A-R-T. For, you know, the deer. And it sounds like 'Black Heart' so your reputation for hating Snape won't be ruined, Sirius."

Sirius and Remus looked at each other. Then they looked at Snape with identical expressions of intense concentration. Harry began to wonder how they'd ever named themselves; perhaps the four years they'd spent trying to become animagi had, in actuality, been spent trying to figure out their nicknames.

"I like it," Remus said finally.

Sirius' grey eyes glinted wickedly when he turned to Harry. "I'm happy to see that you're so well-adjusted to having a black-hearted rogue like Snivellus--"

"--I believe you are to call me 'Blackhart' now--" Snape interrupted.

"--love your mother," Sirius finished. He drew his wand and twirled it in his fingers. "Care to send bats at me again, Blackhart?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "When do I get to join the Marauders?"

"Sorry, kid," Sirius shook his head sadly. "It's another one of your dad's rules. As soon as you were born, he said to me that you'd have to start your own gang."

"You seem to treat my dad's words like law," Harry said slyly. He had suddenly remembered what his father had told him to tell Sirius. "No girls allowed. No kids allowed."

"Those are the rules," Sirius said.

Harry tapped his chin thoughtfully. "I'm sure Dad would be happy that you're still listening to him all these years later. Are rules anything like bets? Like... if the two of you had made a bet, you'd still honor it even though he's dead?"

"Of course," Sirius said virtuously.

"So I take it you'll be naming your first child Elvendork?" Harry asked. "It's unisex, you know."

Sirius and Remus gaped at him. Harry smirked to himself as they tried to work out how, exactly, he had known about the terms of some long-forgotten bet. Warmth flooded his belly when he realized that he really had met his parents. His father had given him the gift of proof (and tormented his best friend as an added bonus).

"How in Merlin's name did you know about that?" Sirius asked. "We never told anyone!"

"He told me," Harry said simply. "After the curse. Before I came back. He was there; and Mum. And Neville."

Harry was not able to elaborate. The moment Sirius opened his mouth to ask questions, Ron and Hermione appeared right next to Harry, and both were in a state of high dudgeon. Hermione's hair had come undone, and was floating bushily around her face. Ron's face was bright red. Harry thought they might be fighting again, until Hermione roared.

"Merlin has done it again!" she shouted. She was quite undone. It appeared as though the mysterious Merlin had finally pushed her too far. "Look at this! Look what he did!" she thrust something in Harry's face. To his surprise, it was their copy of *Memories Unbound*.

It was blank. Every single page had been wiped clean. Harry flipped back and forth. Others began to congregate around him, and there were murmurs of shock and consternation. Arthur had returned from wherever he had disappeared to, and the twins had started a lively discussion of their current theory as to who Merlin had been.

"That's not it," Hermione said wrathfully. "Look," she flipped to the very first page. It was the only one with any writing on it. It was spindly and untidy; it had been handwritten rather than type-set.

"All had better fucking be well," it read. Harry mouthed the words to himself several times. He thought of the implications of what it meant that the writings of the Wise Asp had been obliterated. He had the sneaking suspicion that Merlin had been thorough in his work; Harry doubted that he would ever be privy to the secrets of time travel again.

He was grateful.

"I guess Merlin doesn't want us traveling in time anymore," he said casually. Hermione spluttered with rage. She apparently did not like having knowledge taken away from her.

"At least we know that Merlin isn't Molly," Arthur said unexpectedly. "She'd never use that word."

Everyone looked over at the lone Order of Merlin, First Class that did not yet have an owner. Harry was not sure if it ever would -- would Merlin even feel the need to come back in time after the truly miraculous way things had played out? But still. The symbol of having someone help (or attempt to help) with the long task of defeating Voldemort was important.

"He was a bit of an asshole, wasn't he?" Ron said fondly. And he started to laugh.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

(Christmas)

Harry tripped down the stairs at the Burrow; he'd finally been given an excuse to leave Ginny's side, and if he wanted to carry through with the plan, he had to act fast. Afternoon was already waning, and dinner would be served soon. If he couldn't find Mr. Weasley soon, he'd have to change everything.

Mrs. Weasley was busy preparing the various dishes that would be served with Christmas dinner. For a moment, he stood outside the kitchen, and breathed in the aroma of truly delicious food.

"Mrs. Weasley?" Harry said tentatively.

"Oh, hello, Harry, dear," she said. She smiled at him, but it did not quite reach her eyes. But Harry pretended like he hadn't noticed. He'd done a great deal of damage when he had shown them the memories – Dumbledore had been right. But even the slight distance was worth being able to spend time with them, to get to know them again. He fully hoped that one day, the past could be forgiven. And if his plan went well, he might just get another Weasley sweater. "Where is everyone? Ron hasn't thundered through here demanding food in at least an hour, and I'm starting to get worried."

Harry chuckled. "Ron's up in the attic hiding, I expect. Once Dora started talking – in great detail – about her pregnancy, he ran up there... followed closely by Remus and Sirius, I might add."

She laughed a little. "Men," she said. "Are we still expecting Albus and Severus?"

"As far as I know," Harry shrugged. As much as he wanted to keep talking to her – this was about the longest conversation they'd had since Tom Riddle died – he had to talk to Mr. Weasley. "Listen, do you know where your husband is? I've got to talk to him."

She looked stunned, and something utterly indefinable was in her eyes. "I... he's out in his shed."

Harry paused. Of all the places... Mr. Weasley would be in his shed. The last time he had gone to speak to him there... but he pushed that thought away. *This is for Ginny*, he told himself firmly. It helped that he knew that Mr. Weasley would be polite; he wouldn't turn him away, even if there was that distance between Harry and all the Weasleys except Ginny, Ron, and Percy.

Still, he had to ask. "Do you think he'd mind if I...?"

"No!" she said quickly. "No. Do you want to bring him a snack?"

"Isn't dinner almost ready?" Harry asked curiously.

She turned away, back to the meal she was preparing, and nodded. "Yes, I suppose that wouldn't be a good idea. Would you let him know... when you're done, of course, that dinner will be ready soon? I was about to go out there myself to tell him."

"Of course," Harry said. As he walked out the back door he felt both nervous and elated. He could not imagine that Mr. Weasley would refuse him. Everyone in the world knew how much he loved Ginny. But he suspected that every man felt a mild sense of trepidation when they asked a father if they could marry his daughter.

Fred, George, Bill, and Charlie almost distracted him. They'd bewitched a section of the yard to look as it might in the early summer. Fleur sat on a blanket, watching as the four brothers roared with laughter at the game they played with several dozen enchanted umbrellas. Harry grinned.

"Having fun?" he asked.

They stopped laughing immediately, though Fleur turned a wide smile at him. Almost as abruptly as the laughter stopped, they all pasted jovial grins on their faces. *At least they're trying*, Harry thought. The mean looks and hatred were gone; Harry could live with the fact that he'd hurt them, but only hope that things changed.

"Hi, Harry!" Fred said loudly.

"We're playing swords with umbrellas," George pointed out needlessly. "We could use a fifth..."

"You'd have to be on our team," Bill indicated himself and Charlie. "These two are cheaters."

"It's not Gryffindor's sword, but it's pretty fun... there's awhile until dinner," Charlie said.

They'd been like this for several months now. They tripped all over each other to talk to him, but Harry knew that they didn't really want him there. Still, he may have accepted had he not had things to do.

"Sorry," Harry said. "I've actually got to talk to your dad."

All four of them exchanged significant looks, but Harry had no idea what it meant and had no time to try to figure it out. The Weasleys were acting slightly odd – odder than usual – but it could just be Christmas spirit...

"He's in the shed," Bill said.

"Er, thanks," Harry told him. "Your mum told me..."

The door was open a crack, and Harry took a deep breath and pushed it all the way open. He looked at the table first, wondering, with great fondness, what sort of Muggle tool had driven Mr. Weasley out here on Christmas Day.

He furrowed his brow. There was nothing there. Even stranger, Mr. Weasley sat with his head in his hands. Harry had the momentary

urge to run away, but he looked closer and saw that the older man was not crying, but merely looked tired. He looked back at the Burrow. It was full of guests at the moment, and would be even more packed with friends and family. He'd probably been looking for an escape.

"Is it time for dinner, Molly?" he asked without looking up. "I'll be right out. I thought... he might come today."

"Er," Harry said. "I'm, uh, not Mrs. Weasley."

Mr. Weasley lifted his head and looked at Harry as if he had seen a ghost. "Harry!" he said a little bit too enthusiastically. There it was again, the same thing he'd been noticing for months. The overly nice greeting that cleverly masked the fact that Harry had hurt them badly, but they were making too much of an effort to hide it. Harry did not know whether it would ever completely go away.

"Hi," Harry said. "Mrs. Weasley told me I could find you out here."

"You didn't bring a snack?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Well, no..." Harry said. *What is it with the snacks?* "Dinner is almost ready."

"Ah," Mr. Weasley's smile slipped. "I suppose. Is there something you'd like to talk about?"

It sort of sounded like a dismissal, but Harry couldn't be sure. Suddenly, he had to ask Arthur Weasley a different question, and not the one he had been intending to ask. He saw that he could not, in good conscience, ask the second unless he had an answer to the first.

"Mr. Weasley," Harry licked his suddenly dry lips. "Do you think... is it possible... do you think that, you know, you'll ever be able to forgive me? And the rest of your family?"

"What?" he said blankly.

They stared at each other, and Mr. Weasley looked just as confused as Harry felt. The moments sped by in silence.

"Did you just ask if we could forgive you?" Mr. Weasley finally spoke.

"Er," Harry said. "Yeah. What I did –"

"Give me a minute," Mr. Weasley held up his hand. He seemed to be steeling himself to do something. "Harry, I came out here today hoping that you would join me. I've done it these last several months, whenever I knew you'd be here. Do you know why?"

Harry shook his head, but he began to feel a bright spark of hope.

"When you... died," he continued. "I saw you."

So Ginny wasn't the only one to see some sort of vision. He suspected, however, that Arthur Weasley's was quite different from hers. He wondered if Ron had too, and Hermione, Percy and Luna. And if they did, why didn't they say anything?

"We were right back here, in this shed," he told him. His eyes were vague, and he stared at a point just over Harry's left shoulder. "I asked why you didn't fight, or defend yourself... I didn't understand... I didn't know about the Horcrux in you, not until later. And you said that it was because you had to, and that you couldn't live with yourself if you walked away and let me die."

He paused. "It was very personal, Harry. You didn't say 'all of you' or 'my girlfriend's father.' You took that curse and meant to die for all of us. But we all saw different things – Molly, Bill, Charlie, Percy, Fred, and George, and I assume everyone else who had a rune – and... I'm having a hard time explaining this. We knew... we all felt like it was an individual thing. Like even if I had been the only one in the Great Hall, preparing to fight, you still would have done it."

Harry blinked at him. Of course he would have done it. "Of course I would have," he said. "I had to. It was the only way."

Mr. Weasley laughed shakily. "Percy said you wouldn't understand."

"I don't," Harry admitted. "Well... maybe a little. If I could go back, I wouldn't have chosen the memories I did when you found out the truth. But the fact of the matter is," Harry felt uncomfortable and

vulnerable saying it, but he forced himself to. "I – uh – you know, love you guys."

"You don't understand at all," Mr. Weasley said. "We know that you love us. How could we not? You *died* for us. We just... we don't think we deserve it."

Harry gaped at him. "All of you feel this way? That's why you've been acting strange? It wasn't because I hurt you with those memories?" Joy filled him, and he knew he was right. It explained everything. He stood up, and couldn't stop himself from grinning from ear to ear. "That is quite possibly the best news I've had in a very long time. I thought... I thought it was going to take time, but..." Harry knew that he was being completely incoherent, but it didn't matter at all.

"Mr. Weasley," he said suddenly. "I'll explain in a few minutes, but I'd like to do so with the entire family around. Do you mind?"

He shook his head.

"Oh!" Harry said. "I just have to ask... this'll make it even more perfect," he'd planned a speech; had intended to have a long discussion about how much he wanted to marry Ginny, but he abandoned it. "Mr. Weasley, I love your daughter so deeply that I can't imagine living without her. I want to marry her – again – but this time with your blessing. Please?"

"Of course," the older man said promptly, but he looked as though he had been hit in the head by a Bludger. "I can't think of a better man for her."

"Thank you," Harry said earnestly. "Now we need to go back inside... I have things I need to say to all of you."

He actually pulled on Mr. Weasley's arm. Now that he knew... he could not possibly wait a moment longer than necessary. Bill, Fleur, Charlie, Fred, and George had already gone inside. Harry drew his wand and said "*Sonorus!*" and feeling almost giddy with relief, said, "EVERYONE PLEASE MEET ME IN THE SITTING ROOM! ALL WEASLEYS, ALL GUESTS! THAT MEANS YOU, RON; I'LL MAKE

SURE THAT DORA DOESN'T START TALKING ABOUT HOW SHE'S PREPARING FOR BREAST-FEEDING AGAIN!"

Harry hurried across the yard, Mr. Weasley right behind him. He could hear the thunder of many feet going down the stairs, crashes, and shouts. Mrs. Weasley opened the door to let them through, and Harry swept her into a tight hug which she returned just as tightly.

"I have no idea what's going on," Mr. Weasley told his wife. "But he's very happy."

Happy didn't even begin to describe what Harry was feeling right now. The thing that he had missed for well over a decade was finally within his grasp. He'd given up on it five years ago, but he'd begun to hope for it these last months, and now he almost had it.

"What's this about, Harry?" Ron asked.

He beamed at them. Hermione sat curled up on Ron's lap in a large armchair. Sirius, Remus, and Dora were squashed next to Bill and Fleur. Charlie and the twins had parked on the floor. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley squeezed their way past them to find a seat on the only empty armchair left in the room. Albus and Severus had apparently just arrived, and stood in the doorway. Percy stood by the Christmas tree with his arms around his new girlfriend, Audrey. And Ginny picked her way around her family and came to stand next to him. He didn't think that he'd seen anything quite so wonderful.

"You going to say something anytime soon, mate?" Ron asked. "Or have you been drinking?"

Harry put his arm around Ginny. "I thought... I thought that you lot were still hurt by how I showed you those memories. I thought that I had done too much damage that day for it to easily heal. And I was a right arse for months. I treated the lot of you like -- like rubbish," Harry admitted. He could see now that he had, in many ways, treated the Weasleys the way Severus Snape had once treated him. The thought made him uncomfortable and guilty, even now.

"Harry, you weren't--" Percy began.

"We deserved it," Bill and Charlie chorused together.

"We didn't blame you," Fred said earnestly.

But before they could continue to fall all over themselves to ensure Harry that they did not blame him in the slightest for his reprehensible behavior, he held up his hand. Another thought had just occurred to him. "And I've wondered if your distance was due to what happened at Azkaban," Harry said. "I couldn't help but think that you'd wonder"--he fixed his eyes on a point somewhere over Severus' shoulder--"if I was just as bad as Voldemort. Not"--he held up his hands swiftly when he saw the mutinous looks--"that I think I am. I just... wondered."

"If I recall correctly, Harry, us Weasleys were the ones to offer the most violent deaths," Arthur said. Harry met his eyes and saw that he was telling the truth. "We never blamed you. I'm not even sure if I blame myself. I thought Percy was dead, you see."

Harry nodded. He remembered what he had seen in the Department of Mysteries. He could still see the way the rune shone and shimmered, spinning lazily in the air. "Why didn't you tell me that you had some sort of vision?" Harry asked Ron suddenly.

Ron looked surprised. "I thought you knew."

"How could I possibly have known?" Harry scoffed. "I was mucking about with magic that I don't really understand," he added cheerfully.

"How reassuring," Severus murmured.

Harry ignored this. "Albus," he addressed Dumbledore most of all, because he had always had answers, it seemed. "The terrible power... it wasn't just terrible for me and Voldemort! It was terrible for them!"

There was a ringing silence. Harry had the disconcerting feeling of once more being the center of attention. He was quite proud of his revelation. He had amazingly forgotten that they had thought him dead. And he had not known that Ginny was not the only one to have a vision. He put himself in their shoes, and realized that had it been Ginny or any of the others that had died and had sent a last

message... it might have killed him. His high spirits wilted a bit when no one reacted. No one realized the brilliance, and worst of all, Ginny was feeling exasperated and a little amused.

"You're completely mental, mate," Ron said finally.

"But--"

"Is this actually new to you?" Ron continued. He sounded incredulous. "What? You think we liked seeing you die, and knowing that there wasn't a damn thing we could do about it?"

"No," Harry said. "But--"

"I accept that you didn't realize what happened with the rune, Harry," Hermione said coolly. "It was perfect, by the way. We were in the library, and there were books all around, and I said that"--she paused to clear her throat--"it didn't make sense that one person had to do what you did. It was such an imbalance. And you just... rolled your eyes at me like you do whenever I'm going off on elf rights or those stupid laws about the centaurs. And you said that not everything has to make sense. Love doesn't really make sense."

"I'm pretty deep when I'm dead," Harry tried to say flippantly. He felt very uncomfortable all of a sudden.

"Don't joke about it!" she said forcefully. "It was a beautiful experience, Harry. But it was terrible, too. I can't even describe it, Harry. It hurt quite a lot. If you hadn't come back... I think it... I don't know. But I can't imagine ever recovering from it."

Not for the first time, Harry wondered what the hell he had done when he'd made those runes. He didn't regret it, and he could tell from the defiant, fierce looks on the faces around him that they didn't regret it either. But still. It was obvious that there had been a level of emotional intimacy breached when he had been hit with the curse. He wondered if his soul had had conversations with their souls on the moment of his death; the thought filled him with a sense of wonder, and the realization that he would likely never find out what he had done. And he didn't really have to.

"I keep thinking," Molly licked her lips nervously. "You were just a little boy, when he turned you into the Chosen One. I've thought about that a lot these last two years," she admitted. She stared down at her hands, and she fisted them in her lap. "And when -- when the rune flared, you were just a toddler. And you didn't say anything. But it was terrible knowing that ever since you were barely a year old, you'd been set on that course. You were just so vulnerable, just a baby."

Harry felt an amazing pressure in his chest. Molly was the closest thing to a living mother that he had, damn it. And the fact that she had seen that... maybe they had some of their old closeness after all. But then again, Molly had a great capacity to love. What if it was only because he was the Boy Who Lived? And it could have been anyone off the street that would have made her feel that way, because she was so tender-hearted. It may not even be him. He'd been a complete arse, and just because he loved them, doesn't mean that they loved him--

"Mum!" Ginny said loudly. Harry jumped.

"No, don't--"

"Quiet, Harry," she said. "Would you just tell him that you love him? Because he's missed you for a very long time. And he's agonizing over it."

Harry's entire body twitched with discomfort. He felt trapped. He wanted to run, but he didn't. It was as though his feet were glued to the floor. He felt a little resentful that she would blurt out his emotions like that. He wouldn't do that to her. If she were feeling something obviously private, he wouldn't even consider making it public. Especially now, in this moment. He ruffled his hair and looked up at the ceiling. That hug with Ron before he had thought he was going to die had not been nearly as awkward as this. He was acutely aware of how the skin on his face burned.

"Of course we love you, Harry," Molly sounded surprised, shocked, even, that she had to say it. "We just felt like... maybe we used to be the people you loved. But it wasn't really us anymore."

Harry blinked and remembered his dream. The Weasleys on the other side of the chasm, and a bridge the shape of the rune. He wasn't afraid anymore. Well, I'm sort of afraid that I'm going to cry, Harry amended. It was worse because how often had he wished that he could die for "his" Weasleys? It had taken external force for him to realize that they were fundamentally the same people, and how could he not love them? That would be like him only loving people for what they did for him, rather than for who they were. The moment swelled, and Harry knew that he needed to say something. He cast about wildly.

And then he felt Ginny like a flame in his chest, and she gave him the grace and strength to say what he needed to. He couldn't look anyone in the eye, however. He had his limits. "I felt that way for a while," he admitted. He felt that the truth was necessary for this moment. "But I'm not very proud of that. I've spent years and years wishing that people would like me for me, rather than because Tom Riddle warped the deepest laws of magic and gave me the tools necessary to defeat him. And you're the same people. You have the same care and concern for your children and loved ones. The same sense of humor, the same temper." It was easier to speak directly to Molly than to the men, though he hoped they knew that he meant the same for them. "So, yeah. You're the same people. You really are, and I'm sorry that it took me so long to see that."

He faltered, then glanced around to look at Arthur's shoulder (he was still not ready to make eye contact). "And frankly... if it turns out that my future daughter has traveled back in time to her twelve year old body... I'll have to spend hours in the shed with you, because I'm sure I'd have a complete breakdown, especially if her shifty husband came with her."

Everyone chuckled, as he had intended.

"Excuse me for a moment," Molly murmured, and bustled out of the room. Harry wondered if she was about to burst into tears, though she had never been shy about doing it in front of company before. He still felt anxious, agitated, and desperately uncomfortable. He hoped that the twins had gone temporarily deaf, because once they realized

that Harry genuinely cared about them, he'd be fair game for teasing. And pranking.

It seemed to take forever, but it must have been only a few minutes before Harry could hear her walking back down the stairs. She hesitated for a moment outside the door. Harry could almost see her steeling herself, and thought that she might be feeling as insecure as he did. He felt very exposed, as though he were laying on the ground with a wand pointed at him, and he didn't know if the person was there to help him or hurt him. He was fairly certain that if they rejected what he was offering (and he was already kicking himself for offering it in the first place... they weren't ready to have that same level... he really couldn't expect them to), a little part of him would be lost forever. *And it's my own damn fault*, Harry thought viciously. *I shouldn't have pushed.*

"I made this," she said. "I would have given it to you, but I didn't know that you'd want it."

And she held out a sweater. For long moments, all Harry could do was stare. It was green, and it looked soft and warm. He could tell without even trying it on that it was just his size. My sweater, he thought stupidly. It was a very simple thing. It was just an article of clothing. It was the sentiment behind it that had his heart beating rather rapidly in his chest. He remembered what his mother had said during his time with her, and he found the truth in her words once again. Always and always. The first time he'd said it, he'd had no idea how much meaning just two words would have in his life.

"Thanks," Harry said quietly. He took it from her and, not even bothering to take off his other sweater, he pulled it over his head. He could feel Ginny's joy like sunlight, and it compounded his own. And then he knew that this was the moment. He patted his pocket, where the ring he'd purchased was a warm weight. He'd made a speech, but the words he'd wanted to say had flown out of his head.

He did, however, remember to kneel.

And for the first time, he deliberately sent his emotions to her. They swirled around inside him, and let her know how he had felt the first time he had proposed. That she was his reason for living. He felt the

same now, but he was damn glad that they were going to get a wedding with everyone surrounding them. They would raise their children with their family beside them. Their children and Ron and Hermione's would grow up together. He hoped she felt his love for her like a kiss on her soul, because that was how it felt when she did it for him.

When her beautiful brown eyes filled with tears, he knew that it had work. "Always and always, bright eyes," he said. His voice was steady, but his hands were not as he reached for hers. "Marry me? Again? And this time our entire family will be there to watch..."

Molly started to sob in the background.

"Yes," she said immediately. "Oh yes."

Harry slipped the ring on her finger. Everyone was talking, laughing, and Harry felt his shoulder clapped again and again, but he literally could not take his eyes off of her face, and he thought he just might burst from the joy of it.

It had been a very long road with obstacles that Harry could not have foreseen. But he was finally home.

Epilogue

Thirty-Two Years Later

Harry Potter fiddled with a spell-enhanced marshmallow roaster while he maintained a steady stream of concerns. “—Don’t get me wrong, I’d love to be a grandfather... and Sirius is certainly not getting any younger, and he needs to have some when he can still enjoy them. But honestly, do you think that James and Sarah are ready to have children? They only married two months ago—“

“Are you certain that Sarah is pregnant?” Arthur asked mildly.

“Ginny says she is,” Harry said. “And you know how Ginny is. She gets it from your wife, and Molly started giving us knowing looks practically the day after Lily was *conceived*.”

Arthur snorted. “Are you sure that you aren’t just concerned that you aren’t ready to be a grandfather?”

“That, and I’m afraid of what might come of a Potter and Black union,” Harry shuddered; it was not entirely feigned. The fact that Harry’s son had fallen in love with Sirius’ daughter had shocked the entire family, not least because it was made public when Harry and Sirius walked in on them having sex in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. Harry had told his son (truthfully) what his father had told him so long ago; James was a braver man than Harry. Harry would not want to be Sirius’ son-in-law given how fierce and protective he was of his youngest child and only daughter.

He suspected that his parents were laughing.

“Neville’s only six,” Harry said a bit plaintively. “And Viola is only eight. Am I really old enough to be a granddad?”

Arthur threw back his head and laughed. “Ah... son, let me tell you a little secret. Being a granddad is infinitely easier than being a dad—“

“Thank God,” Harry muttered. Out of habit, he glanced around the shed. He had been a very frequent visitor in the last few decades.

He'd panicked when Ginny had gotten pregnant for the first time, and Arthur had spent hours soothing him, and giving him advice (mostly how to survive the pregnancy without getting his bits hexed off). He'd thought that things would calm down once James had arrived, but he'd spent even *more* time asking all sorts of things that he probably didn't need to fret over ("All right... so what do I do if he accidentally levitates himself into the wall-safe? I've heard that magical children can do that... what if I've left the safe open? And it closes behind him? Do you think I should just get rid of the safe?"). Then James had started talking and walking and generally raising hell, Al had arrived, and Harry had needed Arthur's calming nature every other day.

Harry was proud of himself that he only met with Arthur about once a week now. His two youngest (Viola and Neville) were either much easier to manage, or Harry had (finally!) gotten the hang of being a father. And now he just might be a granddad...

"And Al's been acting... odd lately," Harry said.

"At least he's home for Christmas," Arthur pointed out. "And you didn't actually have to depose the Minister for not telling you what he was up to."

Harry grimaced. He had not taken it well when his second son had practically disappeared off the face of the earth. Harry generally left all the Unspeakables the hell alone, but ever since his son had fallen in with that crowd (gotten a job with them), the secrecy had bothered him. And the months of only sporadic contact with him (an owl, once a month, saying that he was fine – Al was not much of a correspondent) had frayed Harry's nerves to the breaking point.

"I'm the Head of the Auror Department," Harry said sourly. "You'd think that they could've told me where he's been and what he's been up to..."

"You know that Audrey had no idea what was going on," Arthur said. "And threatening to depose your own sister-in-law," he chortled. "I laughed for weeks."

"I still think Percy knew," Harry said stubbornly. He did not like to think it. He was probably closest to Percy of all the Weasley brothers

(besides Ron), and despite the fact that Percy had, thirteen years ago, decided to completely change his career and become an Unspeakable without giving any reasons, Percy had always been very above-board.

"You and Ron aren't still convinced that Percy's Merlin, are you?" Arthur asked.

Harry shrugged. It was a compelling idea, but it simply made no sense. Harry wondered if the person of Merlin even existed anymore. There didn't seem to be any need. All was well. All was *better* than well. Harry had never dreamed that he could be this happy, and he suspected that whatever reason Merlin had gone back in time in the first place simply did not exist anymore. "Mainly we just joke about it," Harry admitted. "But you have to admit, Percy's lips are sealed tighter than a Gringott's vault. Who knows what he gets up to with his Unspeakable friends?"

"You're dealing with something that is very difficult for any father," Arthur said. "The idea that your children have lives that exist separately from your own. They have their secrets. For instance, I've always wondered how James survived Sirius after he and Sarah were found – er – at Grimmauld Place."

"I've always wondered that too," Harry said thoughtfully. "But none of them are saying."

"And it must be doubly hard with Al," Arthur said compassionately. "Since the very nature of his job requires him to tell you nothing about what he gets up to. I admit that when Percy first transferred over to the Department of Mysteries, I felt a bit misplaced. He doesn't come to me for advice, or to complain about his superiors, or even to brag about his latest promotion."

"Does it get easier?" Harry asked.

"You get used to it," Arthur said. He glanced at his watch, and his eyes widened. "Molly's going to jinx us if we miss Christmas dinner... we'd better get back to the Burrow!"

Harry opened his eyes wide. "Don't you want your Christmas present?"

He greatly enjoyed the way Arthur perked right up. Ron had come by his honest love of Christmas and presents honestly. And Harry had a feeling that Arthur would enjoy this particular present a great deal. "It's a bit used. Viola insisted on trying it out 'just to make sure it was good enough for her granddad.'"

With a flourish of his wand, he lifted the temporary Disillusionment Charm he had cast on the riding lawn mower, and laughed when Arthur gasped with delight. "Is it a lawn plower?" he asked excitedly. "I've been wanting one for ages!" He touched it lovingly. "It's so shiny and new... thank you, Harry! Don't tell anyone I said this, but the Potters give the best gifts..."

Harry hugged him. "Only the best for you."

He felt a faint twinge of annoyance that was not his own. "Ginny's getting restless," he announced. "We'd better go back in before she gets riled." Harry laughed again at the mildly jealous look on Arthur's face. He was, Harry had to admit, the envy of the Weasley men. There was nothing like being able to sense his wife's emotions. It certainly kept him off the sofa.

He still did not quite understand the magic behind the connection he and Ginny shared. There were no books written about it, no tomes showing diagrams for why things happened the way they did, and not even Hermione could pinpoint an exact reason. But the simple fact of the matter was that Harry could feel Ginny, and Ginny could feel Harry, and it was as beautiful as the sunset right after a bomb has exploded.

Harry and Arthur walked in companionable silence back toward the Burrow. Harry stuffed his hands in his pockets; the December day was as cold as iron, and their feet crunched on the snow.

"Molly's confessing that she's Merlin this year," Arthur broke the silence halfway across the yard. Harry grinned at the reminder of the annual game they played. It had become a tradition; every year, one of them had invented a more and more outlandish tale. "But she's put

a twist on it. She's confessing that Merlin was, in fact, Dobby, and he told her on his death bed that it had been him," Arthur chuckled.

Harry joined in. This had the promise of being even funnier than last year, when Snape and Dumbledore's portrait had claimed to be Merlin, using a mixture of time travel, body-snatching, and wart powder. "It's Ginny's turn again next year," Harry said. "I think she's already planning it."

"Molly thought of this last year," Arthur admitted. "Said she wanted to try something new. I probably shouldn't have told you..."

"You know," Harry said. "The only person that Merlin ever said he wasn't was Dobby. Did we ever tell you that? He said 'I'm not Dobby.' He could've just been trying to throw us off the scent, though..."

"DADDY!" Neville shouted. *Neville always shouts*, Harry thought exasperatedly. His youngest had only come with two settings: shouting and sleeping. "DID GRANDDAD PUT YOUR HEAD BACK TOGETHER?"

"What?" Harry said blankly. He lifted his youngest up in his arms, wondering how long Neville would allow him to do this.

"That's what Mummy says," Viola smiled. "And stop shouting, Neville, Mummy says we have to practice being quiet for when James' baby comes—"

"—oh, Merlin's balls, how did she know?" James muttered, confirming Harry's fear. Sarah laughed. Harry saw the way his youngest daughter's bright green eyes sparkled mischievously (*Another Slytherin*, Harry thought wryly), and he had a good idea that Viola knew exactly what she had done.

"SHUT UP, VIOLA!" Neville yelled. "MUMMY SAID NOT TO SAY!"

"Neville Arthur Potter," Harry said sternly. "What have we told you about telling your sister to shut up?"

"Yeah, *Nappie*," Viola smirked.

“And don’t make fun of your brother’s name,” Harry said wearily, before Neville could retaliate. His son had inherited his mother’s temper, along with her red hair. Viola, however, was the female version of Harry.

“Better than Al’s initials,” James said, reaching over and ruffling his little brother’s hair. “With initials like ASP, no wonder he got into Slytherin.”

“/’M GOING TO BE IN GRYFFINDOR!” Neville roared. Harry winced, and moved him so he was not quite so close to his ear. “LIKE YOU AND LILY!”

“Of course you’ll be in Gryffindor,” James said bracingly. “We’ll leave Slytherin for Al and Viola, won’t we?”

“YES—“

“I’m going to *beg* the Sorting Hat to put me in Slytherin,” said Viola, who practically worshiped Albus.

“We know, Mags,” Ginny said fondly.

“Slytherin is great, Viola,” Al said. He threw a casual arm around her thin shoulders, and Harry was forcibly reminded of how very much the two of them looked alike, despite the difference in gender. Viola had the same thin face, messy hair, green eyes, and sly smile. “You’ll really like it.” Al looked around the room, an indefinable expression on his face, as though he were drinking in the sight of all of them.

“Al,” Percy said quietly.

“Did I ever tell anyone that I had a special, Marauder like nickname while I was at school?” Al asked. He looked over and grinned at Sirius. “A few of my friends called me the Wise Asp... since I’m a bit of a wise arse, and we were all in Slytherin. An asp is a type of snake...”

Harry threw a startled look at Ron. It was funny that Al had gotten that nickname before they had sat down with him, on his seventeenth

birthday, and told him the full truth of the time travel. He opened his mouth to remark on the funny coincidence—

And a diversion in the form of Rolf and Luna Scamander and their nine-year old twins arrived in a flurry of bundled packages, whispered swear words, and excitedly popping eyes. Neville and Viola immediately dragged Lorcan and Lysander (who were very cool, since they traveled around the world with their naturalist parents) away to get into some sort of mischief.

“Remind me to check on them in ten minutes,” Ginny said. “We don’t want them to blow up the house.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t have given the twins that Erumpent Horn,” Luna said vaguely.

All the adults (even James, Al, and Lily) looked at her, aghast.

“Luna!” Hermione said. “You gave those four hoodlums a—“

“Of course not,” Luna laughed. Hermione hesitated only a moment, but then stepped forward and swept the blond woman into a hug.

“I’ve missed you!” she said. “You haven’t been back to Britain for almost six months... Ron has been driving me crazy—“

“Hey!” said Ron. “You’re the one who—“

“Finish that sentence and you won’t even be allowed on the same *floor* of the master bedroom for the next month,” Hermione warned. Her cheeks were bright pink. Harry did not want to know what this was about.

The next several minutes were spent in such a cacophony of greetings. Harry shook Rolf’s hand at least three times, hugged Luna four times, and joined in the overall joviality of the moment. Snape, who always missed Rolf a great deal at family suppers on Sundays (“He’s the only sane one of the whole lot...” and “I never thought Loony would bring home someone who doesn’t believe in Father Christmas and the tooth fairy.”), was the loudest of all.

“Aunt Luna!” Lily said enthusiastically. “I got an internship with the Surrey Society for Specialized Species! I’m going to be a naturalist just like you!”

“That’s *wonderful*,” Luna said. She grabbed Lily up in a hug.

Harry could not help but notice that Al and Percy had hung back, and were now whispering urgently to each other in an alcove. He narrowed his eyes. Percy was Al’s godfather, so they had always been close. But Luna was Al’s god*mother*, and it was highly unusual for him not to be telling her everything that had happened since she’d been gone. He saw Percy give his head a vehement shake, and Al rolled his eyes—

“Where’s my godson?” Luna called. She spotted Al, and hurried over to him. She was about to throw her arms around him but stopped short. Harry glanced over at Ginny, then Ron, and then Hermione. All of whom were staring. Harry felt a growing denial that came from Ginny. *What is she denying? What’s going on?*

“Hi, Merlin,” said Luna. Her voice rang in the suddenly silent room. “How’d you enjoy the past?”

The floor dropped away from Harry’s feet, and he felt his own shock compounded by Ginny’s shock. *What the hell?* Harry gaped at Al, who was staring at the floor. *No. No way.*

“Fuck,” Ron said reverently. “Holy shit.”

“Er – it was fine, Aunt Luna,” Al said. “It was... just fine.”

Harry’s second son took a deep breath and looked up. Green eyes met green, and Harry could see that his son was sheepish, defiant, proud, and not a little afraid. “Dad – Mum – Everyone... I’ve got a confession to make. I’m Merlin.”

Harry’s world shifted, and he saw little bursts of stars. His brain tingled and the swirl of a memory caught him up, as if he carried a Pensieve inside his head, and as if he were sucked through a door that had suddenly opened in his memory.

Almost everyone he loved was dead. They were gone forever, they were never coming back. Tom Riddle was also gone, but Harry, who had spent the last decade fighting for that end, did not seem to care.

He staggered onto the path that led to the Forbidden Forest, just outside Hagrid's hut. It looked like Hagrid too was dying of wounds inflicted by Voldemort's giants; emergency healers from St. Mungo's had looked as though there was little hope. This was what Harry had fought for? To be the last man standing? It seemed so ridiculous that Harry had laughed, a mad and wild sound that frightened him. It seemed to echo strangely among the trees.

He looked down at the Stone still held tightly in his palm. He had dropped it when he had been struck by Voldemort's Killing Curse. He did not want to summon them again. It had been all right when he had thought he was about to die. He'd been about to join them, they were fetching him. But now... how could he possibly bear the guilt of surviving? All of them... they'd died like they were supposed to, whether it was by the Killing Curse, or flame, or some other method. But no, he was Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. It seemed like he was the only one who ever lived.

He flung the Stone into the trees as far as it would go. He couldn't possibly face them, not when it was so bloody unfair that he still breathed and they did not.

He knelt on the ground, and gripped his hair in his hands, pulling so tightly on it that it hurt. He wondered how he would do it. Should he slit his wrists with Gryffindor's Sword – how was that for irony? Jump from the Astronomy Tower, his body broken and bent like Dumbledore's? Had it actually come to this? He was plotting his own death, instead of Voldemort's--

The snap of a twig. The clearing of a throat. The intake of breath. Harry did not want to know who it was that had followed him. He knew who it wasn't. He rested his palms against the moist, springy earth and waited for whoever it was to talk.

"It's going to be all right," said a firm, sure voice. Harry did not recognize it. He just shook his head. He was suddenly too tired to move. His wand was in his pocket, and he did not even have the

strength to pull it out. So it was fatalistic resignation he felt when ropes bound him hand and foot.

"Coward," Harry said tonelessly, just because he had to say something. "Can't even kill me without making sure I can't fight back first?"

"I'm not going to kill you," whoever it was said. Harry cracked his eyes open--

"What the hell?" he said blankly. There in the clearing was -- himself? The man before him was tall and thin, with untidy hair, eyes exactly the color and shape as Harry's. He looked closer. No glasses. No scar. He gaped at the other man, completely and utterly speechless. Is it me? Harry asked himself, unsure.

"Listen," the other man said. "I've got to do this. I'm really sorry, but Dumbledore--"

Harry groaned. "Merlin. Are we still listening to Dumbledore? If he'd told me that I was a Horcrux, everyone would still be alive. I would've died years ago!"

"I'm not you."

"That's really excellent," Harry said. He sounded very bitter. But here he was after his final confrontation with Voldemort. He had lost everyone. And now some scarless version of himself with perfect vision had come and tied him up. "Because I don't know how I would have survived having a second--"

He interrupted himself. He squinted at the man. The resemblance between the two of them was remarkable; it was striking. He was forcibly reminded of the time he had thought that he had seen his own father, but it had been his future self. "You aren't me from the future?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"No," the man said. He met Harry's eyes steadily. "But I am from the future. Not this future, though. I didn't quite understand -- never mind. I'm your son. I'm Albus Potter."

Harry fought against his bindings. "You're insane. We're insane. Or -- are you under Polyjuice Potion?"

"I'm telling the truth," he said. Then he flashed a quick smile. "You eventually go back in time with Mum and Uncle Ron to save everyone from this fate--"

"I fail again?" Harry said, aghast despite himself. If what this lunatic was saying was true, he went back in time... and obviously he fucked something up again, otherwise the lunatic claiming to be his son from the future wouldn't be here. A vicious throbbing began behind his left eye. "I go back in time to change things, and I screw up again?"

"No," said the lunatic. There was something shifty in his eyes. Harry eyed him suspiciously.

"Did you screw everything up?" he asked. The lunatic took too long to answer, and Harry laughed incredulously. "I must've been a really great father," Harry said sarcastically.

"You--"

"I'll have to remind myself that if I ever have kids, I'll tell them to just say no to time travel," Harry interrupted.

"You don't--"

Harry ignored him. "But it's not as though you're real, anyway. Just a figment of my imagination."

The lunatic looked frustrated and sullen in turns. "Stop. If you'll just let me--"

But Harry did not like the idea that he had gone insane. He understood it, of course. His lifetime stretched out before him, and he was completely alone. Completely. He was already so lonely that he was hallucinating a conversation with his son from a future that could not exist. Not without Ginny. "This just seems fitting, doesn't it? I finally beat Voldemort and go insane--"

The lunatic muttered something underneath his breath. Harry opened his mouth to speak, but found that he had been silenced. For a moment he was uncertain. Can hallucinations do spells? he asked himself.

"Mum -- Ginny Potter -- and Uncle Ron are alive," the lunatic said loudly. "You're going to go back in time and save everyone and eventually have me. And I'm going to help things a bit for you. And don't worry. I'm a professional."

He continued to speak, but Harry was unable to comprehend what he was saying after he claimed that Ginny and Ron were still alive. Hope unfurled inside his chest, though he tried to stop it. It was going to hurt terribly if they were still dead. But if they were alive...

"--and Dumbledore told me that I should do it," the lunatic said. He sounded defensive, and Harry felt suddenly apprehensive. He had a feeling that he would not like what was about to happen.

"Er--"

But it was too late. A small bottle of potion was upended into his mouth. "I'll stay with you until the potion takes effect... it shouldn't be too long," the lunatic was trying to reassure him. Harry glared at the copy of himself. Everything was very surreal. What if he's telling the truth? a small voice inside his head asked.

"And I'm going to have to Confund you, too," he said apologetically. "Don't look at me like that, Dad. I'm sure you'd agree that it has to be done."

Harry did not believe this. He vowed to tell any children he might have someday that "Dad" would not like it if they played with his memories and teamed up with Dumbledore to manipulate his life. They would be absolutely certain that--

"Dad?" Al said apprehensively.

Harry could just stare as every moment in that forest came back to him. He had thought that Al was a lunatic. He'd thought that he'd been driven insane by loss. He surreptitiously pinched himself,

wondering if he was dreaming. Al had been there. His son. His son was Merlin. He'd traveled through time, stolen memories, twisted events, written that damn article, made Harry think that he was going to die... he'd been there in the Department of Mysteries when Harry had discovered just how powerful a force love actually was. He'd walked with Harry when Harry had thought he was going to die. He'd been there. His son.

"It's true," Harry said. "I have a memory."

"He must have used the Forget-For-Now Potion on you," Percy murmured. "He used it on me as well. I presume the unlocking phrase was 'I'm Merlin.'"

"Al," Ginny's voice was unsteady. Harry did not take his eyes off his son, but he knew without having to look that everyone in the room was standing as still as statues. "*Why?*"

"The price was too high," said Al.

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Author's Note:

Well! I hope you have enjoyed the fact that I posted these three chapters together. I was going to wait a few hours in between, but then I decided that I would only be doing that to boost the reviews. I'm not, and I never have been a review slut. I came close, but only because I thought that each of the chapters I posted tonight deserved to have a reaction. But then I remembered that 1) I have no self-control, 2) I didn't want to make you wait any longer than you had to, and 3) the revelation that you just read is what I want a reaction for most.

So! I assume that all of you reading these words have been with BWP through the entire thing. Let me know what you think about it as a whole. I expect that the prologue to the sequel will be out soon. I think that many of you are probably thinking "WTF?" at the moment. All will be explained in the sequel.

Special thanks to: Jack, Simon, Andi, Pooky, Dead2self, swanpride, perspicacity, the rest of the Silver Minxes, and every other faithful reviewer who really made the writing of BWP a joy. I love you guys!

Author's Note:

The sequel has begun! I don't imagine that I will have as quick of updates as I did in the beginning of Backward With Purpose, but I'm fairly certain that the story will move in a timely manner. Now, a few quick facts about the sequel.

1. Albus Potter is the main character of the sequel (hence the title: The Book of Albus)

2. It's going to be more twisty and turny than Backward With Purpose, as Al does not just go back in time once. He goes back seven times, and each time, the reality of the future into which he was born was just a little bit different (or, in some cases, a lot different).

3. He doesn't use the Trojan Horse method of time travel. He uses Foci Memoria.

4. I know that some of you are (rightfully) wary of a sequel. But trust me when I say that this isn't exactly a sequel. In many ways it's a combination between a sequel (as some events take place AFTER Voldemort is defeated, but generally just the first five or so chapters). And after that, it takes place during BWP. I've gotten a few messages from people who think that a sequel to BWP is just icing on the cake. But (and it's likely that I'm biased) the reason why I'm writing Al's book is because I didn't think it made enough sense where I left it.

I will likely keep updating this page as I get more questions, comments, etc. So keep your eye on it.

Outtake #1

Ron and Hermione

Just after the Weasleys go into the pensieve

This chapter is intended for mature readers only

Hermione twisted her hands in her robes. The moment was fraught with tension. Ron, Harry, and Ginny looked as though they might explode at any moment; Ron prowled the room like a caged lion. He looked especially fierce, and his red hair glinted like fire in the dim light of the room. She knew what she was going to do. As soon as she'd seen the Weasleys, she'd known. And maybe it had been even before that, when he'd come home looking fierce and defiant and sad all at the same time. Her heart skittered in her chest. There were books and books and books about sex: informative books, rubbish books, romantic books. But her cerebral knowledge failed her; sex was primitive. It was physical. And Hermione was scared.

"Ron," she said. He didn't hear her, so she spoke again louder. "Ron, let's go to bed."

She watched as her meaning sailed right over his head. "I'm not tired," he said snappishly. "I just can't believe it! I can't believe it!"

"Let's think about it tomorrow," she said firmly. "Let's go to bed. Together."

She saw the moment he caught her meaning. He whirled on her, his eyes widened, and he gave her his full attention. His blue eyes changed, even, from angry and fiery to heated and devouring. Hermione's heart cantered ahead, as though it was already in the bedroom. "You mean..." his voice trailed away. He stared at her lips and licked his own. It registered dimly that Harry and Ginny had hurried out of the room as quickly as they could.

"Yes," Hermione said. Her palms were very sweaty. She just stood there. She wanted to do something, but she didn't feel quite up to the challenge of being the sexual aggressor. Not her first time. And Ron, as though reading her mind, crossed the room with three long strides,

swept her up into his arms, and walked quickly through the archway and up the stairs. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief and pressed a kiss to his neck. His pulse jumped.

Ron hurried past Harry and Ginny's door and did not even stop when it became obvious that it was moving due to rhythmic pounding coming from the other side. *Remember a Silencing Charm*, she reminded herself. Her stomach twisted into a knot. *I've got so many things to remember!* she panicked. *I've got to remember the Contraceptive Charm... I've got to remember to kiss him right below his ear, I know how much he likes that... I've got to remember to move, and what if I scream?*

She'd let him touch her intimately a few weeks ago. He'd played her skillfully until she was melting, and panting, and she'd wanted to scream but it seemed so... so... indecent. So she'd bottled it up, and it had been almost painful. She didn't want to keep it in this time, but what if he didn't like screaming girls? What if she hurt his ears? She hadn't been able to find anything in the books about it, and she wished she could go to Flourish and Blotts and acquire some new reading material, but...

"Are you thinking too hard?" Ron rumbled.

She wrapped her arms tighter around his neck and buried her face. "No," she said in a small voice.

"You are," he sounded amused. He tossed her down -- albeit gently -- on his bed. She plucked at the fabric of the bedclothes. She'd read that most women experienced some sort of nervousness before their first time. That was natural, after all. But she'd never read of a woman sleeping with a man for the first time when the man had already slept with her because he'd traveled back in time. Sometimes it hurt to try to wrap her head around it. *What if I don't measure up to my older self? What if I never do? What if I can't please him?*

"I don't remember you being this nervous our other first time," he said. She marveled at his ability to say the wrong thing at exactly the wrong time. "Want me to come in my trousers again? That seemed to take the edge off you."

She snorted. And when she looked up, he was grinning at her; an open, honest grin that made her melt a little. The fear subsided a bit. "I don't really know what to do," she admitted, flushing to the roots of her hair. She pressed her hands against her burning face.

"Don't worry your head about it," he said cheerfully. "I'll teach you."

"But--"

"Now, now, Hermione," he said, actually wagging his finger at her, while his other hand worked at his own robes. They dropped to the floor, and his erection jutted out at her, tenting his trousers. Her heart skipped a beat. "That'll be five points from Gryffindor, for speaking out of turn."

She glared at him, but kept her mouth clamped shut.

"I'm undressing myself," he announced. "Sometimes, you might want to do this. But for now, in the interest of time and my stamina, we'll just let you sit there. I'll be with you in a moment." Hermione watched, fascinated, as inch by inch, Ron revealed more of himself. He was completely without shame. He even flexed a bit, and it surprised her enough to make her giggle. His penis soon sprang free, and his hand came around and gave it a light stroke. Her throat was suddenly dry, and she parted her lips.

He looked down at it and grimaced. "Haven't had my full growth yet," he said, as though apologizing. "It'll be bigger."

"It looks plenty big to me," she replied, before she could stop herself.

He laughed, then stalked toward her, and she was once more reminded of a large cat. He leaned over her, until their faces were just an inch apart. "I'm going to undress you now," he said in a throaty voice. "And I'm going to do it slowly," he continued. He slipped his hands under her jumper and pulled it up. She felt almost like a child as she lifted her arms in the air, but the way he slowly stroked her back with his long fingers... he was being anything but parental. After he pulled it off, exposing her bra, he pressed a hot kiss against her neck. She shivered.

"See?" he breathed against her neck. "It's better when it's slower. It took me ages to learn that." He reached around and unhooked her bra, though he left the straps on. He gently pushed her back on the bed. He leaned over her and gave her navel a little lick. She squirmed.

"Ron," she said.

"Patience is a virtue, Hermione," he said sternly, though his eyes twinkled. She could feel his penis throbbing against her leg. "And don't you think you should call me professor?"

"No," she said firmly, though her limbs felt rubbery all of a sudden.

"Say it," he said in a sing song voice. "Say it or I won't do this," he pushed her bra to the side and sucked her nipple into his mouth. She gasped and wriggled against him. "Or this," his right hand brushed against her knee, gave it a squeeze, and slid upward. Her thighs fell open on their own accord and he unerringly found just the right spot to tickle. She moaned.

"Professor," she gasped. Her voice broke a little.

"Good girl," he murmured. "I love licking your breasts," he said, proving it. He pressed his hand against her clitoris, but did not move it. Hermione could feel it throbbing. "Because every time I do this," he pinched her nipple and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger. "You get just a little wetter, don't you?"

She nodded jerkily.

"That's my job, you know," he told her. He lifted his head up. "To make sure"--he slipped one finger inside her knickers and tickled the heated flesh. Hermione knew that she was already quite damp--"that you're wet enough. But not yet," he said. He tried to sound mournful, but the huge grin on his face was a dead give away that he was enjoying himself. She was too. "I think..." he tapped his chin. "I think I might have to give you an advanced lesson in pleasure. Think you're ready for it?"

"I am if you are," she said fiercely.

He kissed her lips until they both panted for breath. Hermione realized with a start that it was awfully drafty... he'd banished the rest of her clothes! "Seems like you could benefit from your own lesson on patience," she said.

He shrugged. "I'm still a work in progress. Now," he scooted downward. "This is called cunnilingus. I used to know what the latin bits of the word meant, but I forgot a long time ago... but I think, I think it might have to do with licking," he breathed on her and she moaned again. "Licking and sucking and more licking and more sucking." His finger trailed from her clitoris to her hole, and then swirled the moisture around. And then he bent his head and sucked her clitoris into his mouth.

All thoughts flew out of her head. Blood roared through her ears, and her breath hitched. All of her attention focused on what he was doing; she watched, eyes unfocused, as his red head bobbed between her thighs. And, amazingly, he kept talking.

"I've got a huge appetite," he said. "I love everything about food. I love breakfast, I love lunch, I love dinner, I love midnight snacks and dessert. But Hermione, you're my favorite thing to eat."

The pleasure tightened around her until she knew she was about to orgasm. Still, she listened to his words. And he abruptly drew away.

"No!"

"Trust me," he grunted. "It's easier this way," he picked up his wand, and cast a Contraceptive Charm. And then he was on top of her, and she felt his penis right where his mouth and fingers had just been. "I've gotten you all wet, you see. That's important. It'll make it easier when I slide into you," he kissed her. She was too incoherent to say anything else. "Spread your legs wide, Hermione."

She did, as wide as she could. "Just do it, please, please, please," she begged.

He did as she asked. He stretched her and filled her. There was a brief burst of pain, and he slid in all the way. "You have to get used to me," he said. He stared right into her eyes. "Am I hurting you?"

"No," she whispered. "Keep teaching me, professor."

He laughed, and she felt it all the way inside her. And then he began to move. He pressed in and out of her gently before she really began to enjoy it. And the fire that had turned into a raging inferno while he'd used his mouth on her began to build again. She lifted her knees and then wrapped her legs around his hips and stroked his back. They found a rhythm together, and every time he filled her, a groan escaped both their mouths.

"I can't be sure," he grunted. "But I think you just might be getting an 'O' on this lesson."

"Really?" she breathed. She beamed at him just as he reached between their bodies and began stroking her clitoris in time with his thrusts.

"You're a natural," he panted. "So beautiful."

And he didn't -- couldn't -- say anything more.

Outtake 2:

The Birth of Merlin

The moment Harry held his second son in his arms, he had an overwhelming feeling of what to name him. They'd vacillated, they had. He and Ginny had decided before they had even conceived their first son what they would name their first daughter. It seemed right, naming James after his father. And for a girl, of course it would be Lily. But the stroke of inspiration for their second son had not come immediately.

It had not helped that even though they had decided not to know what sex it would be, Ginny had insisted that it would be a girl. "James and Lily," she'd said, after she'd placed Harry's hand against her middle. He'd been overcome by emotion at the time. She'd tried to laugh off the moisture in his eyes, but they both knew what a miracle it was to have a life so wonderful, and blessings of new life to expand their little family.

"What if it's a boy?" he'd asked.

"I've got a feeling that we're having a girl this time," she'd said. Harry hadn't disagreed.

But the healer, and their small son, had proven them wrong. Their second son had arrived with much fanfare. Ginny had screamed. and Harry, by nature of the bond he shared with his wife, felt like he'd experienced every labor pain along with her. But the Healers had known what they were about after all, and Harry stood cradling the small boy in his arms after what felt like a month of pain.

"He has your eyes," Ginny said. Tears streamed down her face.

Harry did not try to wipe away the moisture on his own face. It seemed like something out of a dream. It seemed surreal, after everything they had been through, that they had not one, but two precious additions to their small family. "Not feeling like hexing my bits off?" he asked shakily. She'd threatened many things during the

last eighteen hours, and he knew when to approach. He ought to, after two lifetimes of exploring her moods.

"No," she admitted. She held her arms out, reaching for their son. "Ohhh," she said softly. "He looks just like you. He's so beautiful..."

Harry looked and looked, but he didn't see any particular resemblance in the infant features. But he hadn't when James was born, and Ginny had been spot on. James had his Grandad Weasley's nose, his mum's eyes, and looked like Harry the rest of the way. And Ginny had known that from the first instant she'd seen their first miracle, so Harry did not discount her powers of recognition. "If only he'd been as beautiful as his mother," said Harry, though the baby was everything he could have wished.

"We didn't think of boy names," Ginny said wryly.

"You were so sure," Harry murmured. He placed his finger near the baby's hand, and his heart thumped when the baby squeezed. "He's holding my hand!"

"He's a Seeker," Ginny grinned. Harry kissed her; she tasted salty from tears.

"Can I show him to the rest of the family?" he asked.

"Of course," she said. "Harry... he looks like an Albus."

Harry stared down at his small son. Being named for Albus Dumbledore was a weighty thing. He'd have quite large shoes to fill. They'd talked about it, of course, in an offhand way. Ginny had been convinced that their second child would be a Lily. But he thought about everything Albus Dumbledore had done for him, and the decision became nearly concrete.

"We'll call him Al, I imagine," he murmured.

"Of course," Ginny said. "I can't imagine calling an Albus in for dinner, or disciplining him."

Harry laughed, and looked at her. "I'm still not sure of the middle name," he admitted. He'd thought of naming his son after Neville. And he wanted to. But it hurt too much, in a way. He'd named his first child after his father. And Albus Dumbledore was old enough to be this child's grandfather. Something in Harry shied away from naming his son after a man who had been in the same generation. "We'll decide on your middle name later," he crooned to his new son, rocking his arms a little. "Mummy and Daddy have to figure it out first."

"Go take him to meet his family," said Ginny, amused.

Harry walked out of the delivery room. He could hear the loud clamor of the Weasleys before he even neared the waiting room, and he felt a fierce flash of pride at showing them their newest grandson, nephew, and family member. "It's a boy!" he cried. Little Albus no-name Potter did not even flinch.

All the women gasped.

"Is that him?" Molly said happily. "Is that my newest grandson?"

She reached for him, and with the smallest of pangs, Harry let her take him. "His name is Albus," he said firmly. He looked straight at Albus Dumbledore when he said it. He hoped that he understood, without Harry having to tell him, how thankful Harry was. He owed the headmaster his life on several occasions. He watched, beaming, as those penetrating blue eyes filled with tears.

"What a name to saddle the kid, Harry," Ron slung his arm around Harry's shoulders. "What's the middle name?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted.

"You should name him Albus Merlin Potter," Fred said pompously, before elbowing Percy in the ribs. "After our two great benefactors."

Just then, little Albus opened his eyes. They were precisely the same shape and color of Harry's. He looked at the silent member of their group; Severus stood with Sirius. Both were patiently waiting their

turn to see the new baby. And inspiration struck him. Little Al had Lily's eyes...

"His name is Albus Severus Potter," Harry said firmly.

Outtake #3

June 2011

The hair on the back of Harry's neck stood up and he froze. Just moments before, he'd been slaving away over the endless reports and paperwork that came with being the Head of the Auror Department. But now... he cocked his head and listened. Silence. No slamming doors. No loud whoops of laughter from James, indignant squawks from Al, or shrieks from Lily. The Potter home was quiet. Too quiet. Ginny was gone covering a Quidditch match, and Harry was in charge of the kids.

And he knew from long practice -- he didn't believe in being an absent father -- that silence meant that some sort of disaster was brewing. Being James' father these last nine years had taught him that.

"James?" he said. "Al? Lily?" He pushed open the door to his study, half-hoping to find two black-haired boys and a red-haired little girl loitering about. But that was too good to be true. The hall was empty. He strode down, senses alert. He needn't have bothered. A small explosion in the form of an eight year old boy erupted into his side. Harry caught James by the elbow before he could topple over.

"Dad!" he shouted. "I can't find Al anywhere!"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked calmly. He'd learned long ago that a crisis according to James was generally not a crisis at all. "Did you say something to him?"

"No," James said defensively. "We were playing hide and go seek--"

Harry wrinkled his brow. "And you're worried that you can't find him? Isn't that the point?"

"Yes," James said slowly, as though Harry was the eight year old. "But I've looked everywhere. I swear, Dad, he isn't in the house."

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but just then he heard a faint chuckle. He knew Al's devious little giggle anywhere. Both of his sons

took after their trouble-making Granddad Potter, but Al was far more subtle. Harry was already preparing himself to have a son in Slytherin. "Al," he said. "What did Mummy and I tell you about wearing my Cloak?"

He had to bite back a grin at the horrified and irritated look that crossed James' face. "That's cheating!"

The skinny five year old pulled off the cloak. He looked at Harry and widened his eyes. Harry was not fooled by the innocent look. Just last week, Al had stowed along in the car while Harry ran a few errands, and he had used the Cloak to do it. It had nearly scared the shit out of Harry when he'd glanced in the mirror to see his son's untidy head and wide grin. And no matter where Harry hid it, he always seemed to find it, and quickly enough that Harry and Ginny suspected he was using magic to do so.

"You're not supposed to use the Cloak," James said forcefully.

"I didn't know," Al told his brother.

"Yes you did," James insisted.

"Did not," Al said.

"Did so--"

The circular argument was broken off when a diversion in the form of three year old Lily appeared. She ran shrieking down the hall. She was wearing one orange sandal, a feather boa, and nothing else. "BOGG'RT! BOGG'RT!" she shouted and threw herself into Harry's arms.

"Wicked!" James said. "Where, Lily?"

"Th' toilet," she stuck her thumb in her mouth and put her head on his shoulder.

James looked suspicious. "Are you sure it wasn't just your poop?"

Harry barked out a laugh before he could stop himself. "It might've been the cat," he said. He highly doubted that Lily had truly seen a boggart in the toilet. He suspected that she was ready for her afternoon nap and wanted a little extra attention. He stroked her back and she cuddled closer. "We'll go check it out and then we'll go read a little story, what do you say?"

She nodded.

"And put some clothes on," Al said.

"Hate clothes," said Harry's little nudist.

"We know," Harry, James, and Al said in unison.

"C'mon, Al," James said. "It's your turn to be it."

"You never found me!" said Al, outraged. "I was following you around and everything!"

"You cheated," James explained patiently.

"Al, give me the Cloak," Harry said firmly. Al reluctantly handed it to him. Harry did a double take when he saw what his son was wearing: one of Harry's ties and his old trainers that he'd thought buried in the back of his closet. His lips twitched. "Al, haven't you got enough of your own clothes? Do you need to wear mine?"

"I want to be just like you, Dad," Al said earnestly.

And just like that, Harry's throat locked up. It hit him like this every once in a while. It seemed like such a miraculous thing, that Harry finally had his family. Times like these were so precious, and it seemed to fly by. Harry could have sworn that Ginny had just given birth to James, but in three years he'd be heading off to Hogwarts. And Al and Lily would soon follow and have adventures of their own. And it just seemed so unreal; life had led him here. He'd reached this place. And, as he always did in these moments as he looked at his children, he sent a silent 'thank you' to Merlin, for whatever he had done.

"Dad? Earth to Dad!" James said.

Harry reached over and ruffled Al's hair. "What do you say we wait a little bit for the story, Lily? Want to play hide and go seek with our boys?"

"YES!" she shouted, suddenly wide awake and quite alert.

James and Al gave each other a high five, looking almost painfully excited. "You can't use the Cloak either, though, Dad," James said sternly.

"And make Lily put on some clothes!"

Outtake #4:

Family Tradition

2019

Harry sipped his eggnog and looked eagerly around the room. It was his favorite time of Christmas day. The sun was setting, the presents had been torn apart as though a herd of hippogriffs had celebrated Christmas at the Burrow, the hooligans they called their children were wreaking havoc upstairs, and the tradition they had started over two decades ago was about to carry on through another year. Someone nudged him hard in the ribs.

"Who is it this year?" Ron asked. He wore a bright orange Chudley Cannons jersey and a fedora with a large feather that hung in his eyes. Rose and Hugo had obviously teamed up to turn their father into the worst dressed wizard in Britain. Harry could hardly look at him without laughing.

"Sirius, I think," Harry said in an undertone. They'd never *assigned* the people responsible for a round of hilarity, but it seemed to go in a certain order nonetheless. "All the kids are upstairs?"

"Think so," Ron shrugged. He was looking a little fuzzy around the edges, as though he'd had about four of the spiked drinks.

Harry leaned back with a content sigh. Everyone had made it this year. Even Luna and Rolf. Their wildness and wanderlust had perhaps been tamed by the surprise arrival of twins. Speaking of twins... he let his gaze rest on Ginny. She didn't immediately notice; she and Hermione were speaking very quickly and quietly in the corner. Harry's smile spread unchecked across his face. His wife was luminescent with happiness and joy, and he knew exactly what brought that extra radiance. Lily, their youngest, was already attending Hogwarts, but the time seemed just about right to have another child.

Ginny caught the wave of emotion from him, met his eyes, and winked.

"Ahem," Sirius stood up and cleared his throat. Harry reluctantly looked away from his wife and turned his attention to his godfather. "I have something to confess," he said in a soft voice. The room practically vibrated from suppressed hilarity. Fred and George, who weren't too old to get into mischief, were already chortling.

"This ought to be good," Remus said loudly.

"Whatever it is, Sirius, you can tell us," Bill said, sincerity practically dripping from his voice.

"Thanks," Sirius said, looking greatly relieved; he was by far one of the better actors of the group. Charlie had tried to do it last year, and had been unable to speak through the laughter. Though that might have been a prank from Gred and Forge. He scuffled his feet, sighed, looked down at the ground... up at the ceiling. His long suffering wife sighed loudly, though she eyed him rather fondly. "My confession..."

"Yes?" said Fred and George together. Harry hadn't forgotten that they'd been the originators of this particular family tradition, on that long ago day when Ron and Ginny had finally forgiven their family.

"I'm Merlin," Sirius said heavily. He held up his hand, as though warding off denials. "No, no, let me explain." He gave Severus a wide-eyed look, but Harry saw the slyness in them nonetheless. He wondered if his godfather was actually capable of looking innocent. "Blackhart begged me to do it," he explained. Ron openly started to laugh when Sirius wrung his hands. "Blackhart, I'm so sorry for betraying you like this; you know our friendship means the world to me."

Severus rolled his eyes. "I'm sure it does, Padfoot." And then he did the unexpected, though after all these years of a cordial Severus Snape, Harry ought not to be surprised. "You don't have to do this, you know."

Harry laughed. He glanced around the room. Only Percy was not openly engaged in laughter of some kind, though a small smile hovered over his lips. Even the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic (a position not filled by Dolores Umbridge, thankfully, but Percy's wife Audrey) was giggling.

"The truth is," Sirius heaved a huge sigh. "The truth is... I don't deserve that Order of Merlin, First Class," he pointed rather dramatically at the mantelpiece, where the award stood. It had been there since the day Merlin had had it awarded to him in a rather private ceremony. Harry did not harbor any illusions about one day being able to give the award to the man (or woman) who had actually been Merlin. But it stood as a reminder of their mysterious benefactor. The blue flames wove and danced inside the blown glass. "See... no one knew why I went. I didn't go to help."

"Oh yeah?" Fred said, grinning broadly.

Sirius ignored this. "I didn't go to get the Horcrux from Gringotts, or to walk with Harry when he thought he was going to die," he let his head hang down as though ashamed.

"Why did you go then, Sirius?" Ginny asked.

"I did it for Blackhart," Sirius said. "It was the end of his life. It was his last wish."

Harry had a feeling he knew where this was going. Apparently Severus did as well. "Oh for the love of Merlin," he said. He rolled his eyes, though Harry thought he might have seen his lips twitch.

"He had dragon pox," Sirius said dramatically. "The Healers did everything they could. Me and Charity agreed that we'd take him home... let him die in peace... but Blackhart had one last request. How could I deny him?"

"You're obviously the soul of charity, Uncle Sirius," said Teddy Lupin, who had joined in the festivities several years earlier. He and Victoire were both old enough to know the full truth of what had happened (they had all decided that it could wait until the children were seventeen years old), and greatly enjoyed mocking all of them. Sirius' son would join the mockery of the adults next year, Harry had no doubt, though for now he sat stiffly in one of the chairs, staring at them as if they'd gone mad.

"I went back," Sirius said portentously. "Using the Trojan Horse method. I used Snape's body. He knew how much luck I had with the

ladies, you see"--he flashed a grin when his son groaned loudly--"and knew that I'd use my charm to help him lose his virginity!"

Despite the fact that he'd been expecting it, Harry sprayed his eggnog.

"That's really why I was in the room of loooooooooove," Sirius told Harry. "I figured that Blackhart's poor body needed all the help it could get."

"This from the man who named his son Elvendork?" Severus sneered. "And I'll have you know--"

"Stop!" El said, grimacing painfully. "Please don't finish that sentence. I'm begging you."

"So toss everything you thought you knew about Merlin--"

"Not that we ever knew much," Hermione said; she would have sounded bitter if she hadn't been smiling.

"Right out the window," Sirius said. "Defenestrate it. Because I am Merlin, and I went back in time to get Blackhart laid!"

Harry laughed so hard that his sides ached. Ron was slapping his knees, and Arthur's face was bright red. Even Molly was giggling, though she looked reluctant about it. Her eyes kept straying over to Victoire; Harry thought she might be thinking the conversation a bit inappropriate for her oldest grandchild. It was sort of sweet that she assumed that Teddy and Victoire didn't know each other fully. Harry wished he had the same illusions, but his godson had come to him for advice.

"Who is Merlin?"

Harry jerked his head around. His second son, Al, stood in the now open doorway. His face was alive with curiosity and suspicion. Harry felt suddenly guilty; Al would not take it well when he was told he was too young to know. In many ways, he was a lot like Harry, though (and this was painful for Harry to admit) he was a lot smarter.

"You're supposed to be upstairs, Al," Ginny said.

"I just came to ask if Emmy could come over tomorrow," he said defensively. "Who is Merlin?"

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